



954 1271 52-39674

Jang

Invitation to tea.

954 1271

52-39674

Jang

Invitation to tea.

\$3.50

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

Books will be issued only on presentation of proper library cards.

Unless labeled otherwise, books may be retained for two weeks. Borrowers finding books marked, defaced or mutilated are expected to report same at library desk; otherwise the last borrower will be held responsible for all imperfections discovered.

The card holder is responsible for all books drawn on this card.

Penalty for over-due books 2c a day plus cost of notices.

Lost cards and change of residence must be reported promptly.



Public Library
Kansas City, Mo.

DATE _____

Invitation to Tea

מחזור

DEC 20 1964

MAR 19

Invitation to Tea

MONICA LANG

WORLD



The World Publishing Company

CLEVELAND • NEW YORK

FIRST EDITION

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 52-8432

HC 10 52

Copyright 1952 by Monica Lang

All rights reserved. No part
of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission
from the publisher, except for brief passages included
in a review appearing in a newspaper or magazine.
Manufactured in the United States of America.

Invitation to Tea

Chapter 1

I CANNOT THINK back to the time when I did not know George McCrie, nor can I remember my first meeting with him. He always maintained that I was in my bath one winter evening celebrating my first birthday with a couple of celluloid gold fish.

George had been born in India where his father was tea-planting on the faraway Assam-Burma frontier. He had suffered the fate of all European children born in the Orient, of having to be separated from his parents at a tender age and sent home to a more temperate climate to school. My warm-hearted and compassionate mother, who was a close friend of his family, had begged to be allowed to add the lonely little boy to her own boisterous brood. She already had her hands full as the wife of a busy and immensely popular London doctor, but she was never too occupied to go the extra mile. That's how it happened that three times regularly each year after George started going to boarding school, he came to spend his vacations with us.

George was a charming companion, not merely because he could tell such wonderful stories about tigers and leopards, elephants and snakes, but also because when he was with us he was my constant champion in the perpetual warfare that I had to carry on single-handed as the only girl against four husky brothers. He would stand just so much persecution of me by the boys; then, with quiet authority he would take over the situation and calm would be restored once more. It was not so much what he said as a sudden sternness that took possession of him. He created an atmosphere of mastery which brooked no disobedience, and the boys, who were really devoted to him, responded like lambs, much to my secret joy and satisfaction.

The chief trouble seemed to be that I was a girl. I was regarded as perfectly capable of fetching and carrying to the point of exhaustion. I early learned the necessity of keeping my mouth shut regard-

ing any breach on their part of the few rigid rules laid down by Mother to be observed at all times. I obligingly allowed them to press the pants of their Sunday suits under my mattress because my bed was bigger and accommodated four pairs at once. Many a time I extended a loan, without interest, from my large income of sixpence paid to me every Saturday by Mother. Even so, when I wanted to join any of the activities in the recreation room, whether it happened to be the making of a slingshot, or wrestling with the vagaries of an electric train, or possibly demanding a turn with the boxing gloves, I was sharply reminded that I was only a girl and ordered to retreat to my own end of the room. Disobedience or defiance meant instant retribution in the form of a quick and agonizing bending of the arm backwards, or the dropping of a worm down my neck, two or three of which were always kept on hand in a bottle under the window seat. Very rarely a somewhat loving and amiable attitude was adopted towards me, but this was usually near the time when somebody's birthday was approaching. Yet I loved them devotedly—Edward and Hugh, Henry and Johnny. If anything had happened to any one of them it would have happened to me too. Johnny was perhaps dearest to me. The year and a half that separated us seemed as nothing compared with the three, five and six that made the others put on such insufferable airs.

Though George was over eight years older than I, he never traded on any such advantage; he seemed to have the knack of making me feel grown-up and important. He always let me do the things I loved, chief of which was unpacking his suitcases as soon as he arrived. They never failed to contain some strange and exotic treasures sent specially from India by his parents for our delight. One of the earliest gifts that I can remember was an enchanting silk dressing gown that had a fierce-looking dragon worked in colored silks all over the back. Very dashing it was and I was restrained with difficulty from wearing it to church. Sometimes there were brass and ivory ornaments, delicately embroidered hankies that smelt of faraway places, peacock feathers, and pieces of turquoise, but the best of all gifts he had sent home for my seventh birthday. Handing me a little blue box from his pocket as I knelt beside the open cases in his room, he had said half teasingly, "Shut your eyes, Chicken, and open the lid, and see what the king has brought you."

I had obediently closed my eyes and quickly felt in the soft tissue paper and the next moment George had taken my hands in his and was slipping something over my wrists. At the command to open my eyes I saw four of the most exquisite little silver bracelets, two on each arm, glinting and sparkling in the sunlight, each tiny carved rose on the narrow bands of silver looking for all the world like individual diamonds.

For a moment I had been too spellbound to speak, then, impulsively, I had risen and flung my arms around George's neck. "Thank you, oh, thank you, Georgie," I had said over and over again. "They are simply beautiful, I shall wear them always as long as I live."

"I thought perhaps they'd be what a little girl would enjoy," George had answered, smiling broadly, and I had been able to sense his pleasure at my delight.

So engrossed was I with my treasures that, contrary to my usual wild enthusiasm, I paid little attention to the preparations that were going forward for our invariable holiday visit to the country. Uncle Henry, Father's brother, had a wonderful farm nestling at the foot of the Sussex downs that was our second home, and he and Aunt Helen having no family of their own reveled in having us around as often as we cared to go to them. For me it was never too often, for at the farm I found complete fulfillment for my passionate love of animals and flowers and the joys of country living.

George was a tremendous asset, as ever, to the halcyon days we spent at Red Gables, for he could ride a horse, fish for trout, he knew all about birds and butterflies and how to grow things, and he never tired of teaching me all that he knew. On wet days we would settle ourselves up in the hayloft and he would take me for enchanting journeys through the deep jungles and green plantations that had been his early home and to which he was determined to return one day.

So carried away was I by these trips upon a magic carpet that it was never without difficulty that I returned to the more mundane side of daily living which seemed to accompany the process of growing up for a small girl in town or country. There were so many essentials that had to be acquired before one could even hope to reach the status which qualified one to become a "lady," whatever that might mean. As well as absolute tidiness in the bedroom, no

hairs must be left in the brush and scratching in public was taboo. The slightest suggestion of an oncoming burp or worse had somehow to be strangled at birth, while banging on the door of the toilet with the bald announcement to the one inside that you could wait no longer was shameless immodesty of the worst order. This I always felt was a little unfair, for Johnny would shut himself up there for unlimited periods to get a better view from the windows of what was going on in the world below.

The years sped gently by almost unnoticed. Outwardly, I suppose there was little change in our routine, but changes there were, quiet and unobtrusive ones, that marked our progress into wider fields. I remember that my dresses had perpetually to be lengthened; I was allowed to stay up a little later at night and the boys were required to knock on my bedroom door before entering, instead of bursting in like a hurricane at any moment they thought fit.

It was in the late summer of 1911, however, when I was almost eleven years old myself, that events began to happen which brought the wide horizon of life into fuller view.

Mother slipped on the polished floor and broke her ankle, and when the dismay and anxiety had subsided and she assured us she was not suffering too much, she quietly handed over to me from her own only too capable hands many of the household duties. It made me feel immensely important; not only that, but I was able to do so many extra things for Father. Between my father and myself there was a bond so close that no words could describe it. Among the most cherished memories of my early years belong the evening hours when, free from his arduous duties for a spell, wearing his old velvet smoking jacket, and still smelling slightly of ether, he would relax in his big armchair ready for me to curl myself on his lap while we discussed the ups and downs of life in their most minute detail. A great sense of peace and comfort always took possession of me. I could say to Father what I could say to nobody else. He always understood. Against the perpetual tearing down that I received from the boys, he quietly and systematically supplied the necessary building up, and by precept and example he sowed the seeds of confidence, endurance and sense of duty which were to be so necessary to me in the years that lay ahead.

It was about this time too that I suddenly began to realize that George had grown from a boy into a young man under my very eyes and I had scarcely noticed it. He smoked a pipe, shaved every day, took a great interest in his appearance and played bridge in the evenings at Mother's not infrequent parties. He had only another year or two to complete at college and spoke occasionally of his eagerness to return to India and his beloved tea plantation. He was still the same enchanting companion who never failed to make me think I counted for something in the scheme of things, and it was during the period leading up to my thirteenth birthday that he completed his training of me at the Farm that turned me into quite an efficient horsewoman, fisherman and somewhat milder golf enthusiast.

I had always refused, however, to have anything to do with a gun. It was misery to me to see anything shot. I tagged along with him and Uncle Henry and the boys when they went after birds and rabbits, but it was only because I was big now and didn't want to be called a sissy. It was my duty to carry home the soft warm bodies clutched to my bosom. Often I dawdled far behind because I was afraid they would see the tears that trickled unrestrainedly down my cheeks. I would sit in a hidden spot in the woods and taste the salt drops with my tongue, wondering how it was that the nicest men seemed to be filled with an urge to kill.

One summer evening when I had evidently tarried overlong, George suddenly appeared through the trees, his gun over his shoulder.

"What's the matter, Chicken," he smiled, "tired?" He knew very well I wasn't tired but it was typical of him always to present a way out. He put his gun down against a tree and came and sprawled out beside me on the dry leaves.

"No, I'm not tired," I answered, hoping there was no evidence of my weakness on my face. "I was just wondering why it is that you men enjoy killing these soft lovely things."

My lap was full of rabbits and birds. George looked at me for a moment without answering. His face was flushed with exertion and little beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"I wish you were not quite so soft-hearted," he said slowly. "It's

not killing that appeals to a man. I suppose the excitement of hunting and so on dates back to the time of prehistoric man when he had to do it for the larder."

"Perhaps it does," I answered without conviction.

"Then you know," he went on, "animals are pretty cruel to each other. You've seen hawks take baby chicks. If the rabbits weren't kept down a bit they'd cause endless damage to the farmers."

"I know that's true," I conceded, "but still I hate it."

"Well, it's good healthy exercise and recreation, Monica dear," he said quietly. "A man who learns to be a good sportsman learns a lot of other things as well. To my mind it's much better than being a gigolo or something like that."

"A gigolo!" I answered, my eyes almost popping. "What on earth is that?"

George threw back his head and roared with laughter, and for the first time I felt that there was a dividing wall between us—something that he knew and I did not. Rolling over, he looked up into my face.

"Oh, Chicken, I'm sorry. I spoke without thinking."

"Well, what is a gigolo? Tell me, can't you?" I persisted.

"I suppose it's a man who spends his time in dance clubs and night clubs and so on. Not much of an occupation for a man, is it?"

"I really don't know." I was at sea. "I have never thought about that. Don't you like dancing, George?" I had never thought of George as dancing, either.

"No, I can't stand it," he laughed. "I think it is an utter waste of good time."

"But I want to learn to dance," I answered hurriedly. He had better know the worst about me right away. "Really I do."

"You will when you go to school, Chicken. All girls learn to dance, I imagine."

"I don't want to go away to school," I said promptly. "I have a horrid feeling," I added, "that it's fast approaching. Mother has hinted at it several times lately in a roundabout way. I am perfectly happy with a governess."

"You will like it, though." George was quite emphatic. "I would not have missed it for anything, and you must learn to live with girls sometime." He smiled. Suddenly his voice became more seri-

ous. "You are getting so big, Chicken, I can hardly realize how the years have passed." Very gently he took my wrists in his hands. Pushing back my sleeves he looked for a moment at my silver bracelets which I had worn consistently since first he had put them on.

"Do you still like these things?" His voice was half appealing, half anxious, as if he were somehow afraid I might say that I didn't.

"Why, of course I do. I love them just as much." I was unhesitating in my assurance. "How could you ever think that I wouldn't?" Suddenly I caught my breath. There was a look in those calm grey eyes that I had never seen before. A kind of yearning, forlorn, hungry sort of look.

"Oh, Chicken, I hope life will be kind to you. I couldn't bear it if you should be unhappy."

My heart missed a beat. This was a George I had never seen before, a voice I had never heard. It gave me a strange fluttering feeling inside. I couldn't make it out at all and didn't even know what to say. Loosing me abruptly George jumped to his feet.

"Come on, Curly, we shall be late for dinner," he said quietly. Picking up his gun he turned and helped me up. Almost in silence we covered the two fields that separated us from the house. An odd sort of reserve seemed to have fallen between us. I just couldn't fathom it. It was sort of like wearing your shoes on the wrong feet, and I wondered if I could have hurt his feelings saying what I had about men killing, or gigolos or dancing or something. But as we reached the garden gate he slipped his arm gently around my waist.

"Don't worry your curly head about anything, Chicken. Just stay the way you are and have all the fun you can."

Impulsively I turned and flung my arms around his neck.

"Oh, George darling, you stay the same too. I love you so much."

Quickly I ran into the house, my heart singing once more, the thought of school and everything else forgotten. But less than two weeks later on our return to London, change swept over me like an avalanche. Mother was talking to a friend over the phone one evening and the conversation drifted up the stairs to me in my room.

"George has grown into an amazingly handsome young man," she was laughing gaily as she chattered on. George has always been handsome to me, I thought to myself, ever since I can remember. I could see, of course, that he had become broad-shouldered and

very tall, his fair hair was perhaps darker than it used to be but his eyes were just as grey and kind and understanding, with their long lashes which had ever been my secret envy, and his features were the same with the well-shaped nose and a certain firmness about the mouth. It was Mother's final remark, however, that kept me rooted to the spot.

"He will be going back to India just before Christmas, I'm sorry to say, and no doubt breaking a good many hearts when he gets there!" George going back to India in less than three months! Surely that couldn't be true! I had always known that the day would come sometime in the future, a vague and faraway future as far as I was concerned. A great wave of childish misery swept over me. I couldn't imagine life without George. Who was going to fight my battles for me now? What would anything be like in the big rambling stone house or on the Farm without his strong yet gentle and light-hearted companionship? I was aghast. Then what did Mother mean too about his breaking a good many hearts? George would never break anybody's heart, he was much too kind. I would ask him myself, I vowed, before he left, but when the time came for his last visit I was laid low with measles of all things, and George had to go to a hotel before sailing. I had never been ill in my life and I was utterly disgusted. I couldn't even see George and my farewell consisted of a box of lovely pink roses from him with a little card which read, "This is too bad, Chicken . . . get well quickly and be good till we meet again. . . . don't forget to write. Best love, G." Whether it was the measles or the roses or both I didn't know just then but there was a tight little pain in my throat and a feeling of dust in my eyes. I couldn't eat any supper, my temperature soared and I just wanted everybody to leave me alone.

But worse was to befall. When I was quite well again and George was far away, Mother broke the news to me one morning that she and Father had decided that the time had come at last when I was to be sent away to boarding school.

Chapter 2

THE TWO Misses Brandon of Downside House, a private school for young ladies, were blonde, elegantly attired, of uncertain age and immensely adequate. They looked somewhat like a pair of proud ships in full sail, poised, dignified and capable of weathering any storm. Until a trim parlour maid ushered Mother and me into their presence late one blustery January afternoon in 1914 they had been to me merely a printed word at the bottom of a page.

Mother had been rather artful in handing over for my inspection a slim brochure, profusely illustrated, on whose pages was written the aim and purpose of Downside. She evidently considered that this was the first and most tactful step in selling me on the dreaded prospect of going away to live entirely with women for a change.

I gathered that Downside House was healthfully situated in wooded country near the sea, that it was enclosed in its own grounds of ten acres and that the drains and water supply were beyond reproach. I had to admit that the long straggling house looked rather attractive from the picture, with its wide lawns and many flower beds, and I noted that a high stone wall firmly encircled the young ladies just in case. A fully competent staff guaranteed to mould each individual character kindly but firmly to enable her to take her place in the world five years from her date of entry into the field of broader education.

"So this is Monica," I heard a quiet voice saying as I stood on that memorable afternoon in dumb agony beside Mother, in my revolting and scratchy navy blue serge uniform. I looked up defiantly into a pair of the kindest blue eyes, and into another pair almost identical, a few feet away. The Misses Brandon were smiling and asking me to take off my coat. Mother, a strange expression on her sweet face, was already seated by the large log fire with a cup of tea in front of her. She had, of course, had several meetings with the two

ladies before finally satisfying herself that her ewe lamb was not going to be tossed into a lions' den. Almost before I could rouse myself from the daze into which I had fallen I was aware of a cessation in the conversation, Mother's arms were around me in farewell, I was fighting as I had never fought to keep back my tears, and the next moment she was gone. Like a trapped animal I was being gently led by Miss Kate up a wide flight of stairs and along a corridor to the room that was to be my home during the moulding process.

"We've put you in with Pat Holdron, one of our nicest girls." Miss Kate's voice was warm and understanding. "Just unpack now, dear, and relax. I know you will soon settle down happily."

As the door closed I sank onto the side of my bed and burst into tears, the big noisy enveloping sobs which seem somehow to belong only to youth. In later years the tears force themselves relentlessly through tight-shut lids, the pain in the throat is almost unendurable, and the next morning one looks ten years older at least. I felt utterly abandoned, lost, forsaken; the old landmarks had suddenly disappeared. Even George, my strength and stay, was gone beyond the seas. I was alone. I'd run away, I promised myself fiercely as I searched for my hankie in the mysterious folds of my dreadful new get-up. That's what I'd do. I'd find some way of escape. Father and Mother couldn't really want to send me away like this, there must be some mistake! Suddenly the door opened, and a freckled-faced, bespectacled creature with a beaming smile and blonde pigtails was standing right in front of me.

"Hey, you, cheer up! Monica, that's your name, isn't it?" Coat, hat, pocketbook were heaved with great force onto the opposite bed. "You'll be as gay as a lark in no time. Look at me. I've survived two terms and I cried every day for a week at first. It's grand fun here, really it is."

Pat's gay little laugh was like the tinkling of a small silver bell. Her stimulating approach certainly was just what I needed, and the next half hour was spent in answering endless questions about my age, home, religion, interests, what infectious diseases I had had and how much pocket money I was to receive. She came into my life like a friendly spaniel, and remained in much the same manner, guiding, guarding, leading during those first bewildering weeks

till I could stand firmly on my own feet. "Remember," she had impressed on me firmly, "you'll soon get used to girls and by the time you have been kicked around here for a while you'll never let anyone push you about again. . . . I don't, specially my two elder sisters. I told them frankly if I am old enough to be sent away to school I'm old enough to be treated as a human being and less like a cross between a village idiot and a carrier pigeon." For which gem of straight prose I was to be eternally grateful from that day forward in my dealings with my brothers.

The daily round in this strange new world seemed to hinge largely on the ringing of bells. We rose to bells, went to bed to bells, classes began and ended with bells, we were summoned to meals by bells and running appeared to be the only known means of locomotion. Like a flock of chickens released in masses from their coops the young ladies pursued their joyous way at a brisk trot. I started to run everywhere myself.

Gradually in the ensuing months I began to realize that women were really quite a race, and that unhampered by male domination there was almost nothing that they could not do. The procession of accomplished and successful women who came my way in the form of visiting lecturers, teachers, missionaries, explorers, expanded my vision beyond my wildest dreams. I was surrounded by women who won my greatest admiration. Two of the prefects were even going on to study law and medicine respectively. It was all most enlightening and no doubt exactly what my parents had anticipated and desired. The only male on the horizon was Clark the boot "boy," in itself a glorious misnomer for he was seventy-five and completely bald, but evidently considered long past the age when a bevy of lush young women would cause him to raise his eyes from the endless piles of boots and shoes with which he was perpetually surrounded.

Life certainly moved forward, and in the realm of both work and play it gradually developed that I was not such a misfit after all. I was quite bright in class, sang in the choir and ended my first year as the star goal shooter on the basketball team.

Amidst the complete change that had come over my life the memory of George became fainter and fainter. Sometimes I could hardly remember what he looked like. True, I wrote to him once in a while, but it was rather like writing to a statue, though the statue

always answered and also kept up a faithful flow of correspondence with Mother. It was the onset of World War I that cast a shadow over the ensuing year, taking Edward and Hugh from the family circle into the army, but even so, under the wise and infinitely understanding government of the Misses Brandon the moulding process went uninterruptedly forward.

No little excitement was caused during my third year by my somehow winning an inter-school competition in the literary field with an essay on the place of the modern woman in the world! I entered just for fun and Father and Mother seemed to be more elated than even the Misses Brandon. That achievement led to the formation of a school newspaper with Pat as chief editor, for her ambition lay along journalistic lines, and any amount of talent was uncovered among the young ladies. The newspaper venture led most unexpectedly for Pat and me into a side of life that up till then had scarcely ever entered my thoughts. Pat and I were busy sorting manuscripts and drawings one evening in our study when she suddenly handed me a sketch of a mother and baby which I thought quite beautiful.

"Do you know anything about sex?" she asked.

"Sex?" I answered in astonishment. "What on earth do you mean?" Her question was so unexpected and irrelevant.

"Yes, sex, you know, men and women and babies and all that."

"Well, really," I laughed, "I'm sure I don't know, I've never thought much about it." I was nonplussed. "I know where babies come from, you can't live in a doctor's house without taking all sorts of messages, 'Can the doctor come at once?' and all that sort of thing, if that's what you mean."

"Oh, I know all that," she answered quickly, "but I mean all about men and marriage and what happens when you are grown-up and what not. Do you know all that?"

"No, I don't." I could see Pat was all agog with information, and I wondered what she was driving at all of a sudden.

"Well, I hadn't thought much about it either," she babbled on, "till we got a new maid in the holidays. When the family were out she and I used to have supper together in the kitchen, and she was lots of fun. One evening she asked me if I knew about life and men and things and when I said no, she said she'd tell me. She fairly

rocked me to my foundations." Pat was emphatic here: "I think men are to be avoided."

I stared at her in blank astonishment. "Have you gone out of your mind?" I said at length. "I've been brought up with men and I think they are rather nice."

"You don't understand, silly." She got up from her chair and joined me on the window seat. "I'll tell you what Emily told me. I must get it off my chest."

There followed in detail, and Pat was a master hand at detail, the complete biological story, according to Emily, of the ways of men with maidens in this wicked world, the full chronological history of the how, when and where of the facts of life. I was absolutely paralyzed while alternate waves of repugnance, incredulity and alarm swept through me. Even at fifteen years of age I had never heard the slightest suggestion of any such goings-on. I vaguely accepted the fact that people fell in love and married and set up house. A baby inevitably followed, but I had never given the subject any deep thought. I hadn't been stirred by an overwhelming sense of curiosity. I had always been too busy with many things. Pat's revelations hit me like a blow between the eyes. I was staggered.

"Don't just sit there looking as if you had seen a ghost," I heard her saying. "I suppose we have to know sometime."

"Well, really, Pat," I answered at last, "I don't know what to say. Probably Emily doesn't know what she is talking about."

"Doesn't she, though?" Pat flashed back. "She knows all right. Why, her sister was betrayed by a sailor and he went off to sea and they all had to pitch in and take care of the baby." Pat's eyes were as round as saucers. "And Emily herself has had a barber and a farmer as boyfriends and latterly a bus driver, and she said she gave him up because they went for a hayride one evening and he drank beer, and on the way home in the dark she had to fight tooth and nail to defend her honor."

"To defend her what?"

"Her honor, fathead, you know . . . to prevent herself being overpowered and left with a baby for a cert. . . those were her very words. She said men are all the same, give them an inch and they take an ell, and when they have had a drink they are quite wild."

My brain was reeling. A jumbled mass of sailors, barbers, beer, babies, bus drivers and biology followed each other in quick succession across the screen of my mind. I couldn't make head or tail of the volume of sordid information the versatile Emily had injected into our young lives. I felt as if I had suddenly turned to jelly inside, and didn't want to proceed another inch along the road that led me out into the great big world. A horrible sense of depression descended upon me. I thought I should like to be sick out of the window. At that moment the bell rang for prayers.

"Look here, Pat," I gripped her arm as we walked out into the corridor, "don't discuss this with any of the others. I'm sure it's not true and it wouldn't do you any good to start anything like this."

"You're the only one I would talk to." Pat slipped her arm through mine. "I thought perhaps you might know and ease my mind a bit. Anyway, let's forget it."

I didn't find that so easy though and lay awake for hours after I got to bed. I simply couldn't reconcile the whole thing with the people I knew and loved. I couldn't begin to fit my family into such a picture at all. As far as drinking beer was concerned, I had seen George and Henry drink beer dozens of times at the Farm, and Uncle Henry too. All it did to them was to make them go to sleep under the trees. They had never shown any sign of going suddenly berserk. According to Emily, men were just marauding beasts who were safe only when kept on a collar and chain. Once the leash was taken off and they came in close proximity to a female, they chased her up hill and down dale, over meadows and streams and desert wastes until finally, overcome by exhaustion, she was forced to give in to a fate worse than death. No, I just couldn't believe it. There was something wrong somewhere. Maybe there was a certain degree of truth in some of the biological details, but even these I shelved quickly, as one turns the page hurriedly on a picture that fills one with distaste.

Deep down I believed that people had to love each other really to make a home, with the sort of love such as I had always seen between Mother and Father. I felt certain that somewhere in all this confusion lay buried the secret and the truth and the beauty of life, and I was going to cling to that no matter what anybody said. Some-

day perhaps I would ask Father to straighten this whole thing out for me, but the very thought of mentioning such things to him or to Mother, or the boys or anyone, sent a hot wave of embarrassment and misery right through me even in the darkness. I would thrust this horrible, ugly story completely out of my mind once and for all.

Chapter 3

IT WAS PROBABLY the well regulated and quietly disciplined routine of our daily lives that, in spite of a world at war, made the passing of the years a thing of little consequence. We went from work to play to holidays to work again with the same precision as the ebbing and flowing of the tide. The impulsive, sensitive, belligerent little creature that I had been when received within the walls of Downside had been tamed and moulded into a more poised and stable and understanding personality that looked out onto the last remaining months in the place that had become so dear, with a pang of genuine heartache at the thought of leaving it. But I was almost seventeen, I had learned in great measure to accept the inevitable gracefully, to look forward and not back and to keep things in their proper perspective.

What the passage of time can do, however, struck me very forcibly in two entirely different ways. There had been the matter of my silver bracelets a few months previously. Worn consistently for almost ten years, and for the latter part of those years almost unnoticed, their extreme tightness had attracted the notice of the school nurse, and unknown to me she had reported the fact to Miss Brandon. Almost before I had time to think, my little silver circlets were lying in pieces in front of me on a black velvet-topped showcase in a downtown jewelry store. Admittedly there had been a definite twist of pain in my heart. Like a brief flash on a screen I had suddenly seen myself standing in front of George as he had slipped the treasures onto my wrists. Clearly I heard my piping little voice, "Oooooooh, they are beautiful, I shall wear them always . . ." But that was all part of a childhood past. George had become just a name, probably I should never see him again and I wasn't going to pay any attention to the little niggling sense of disloyalty and regret which was struggling to gain the upper hand. What was done was done and that was the end of it.

Then there had been the other matter of my altered relationship with the boys. The change had been gradual through the years, and from the old, hectic, teasing, tormenting existence had blossomed a deeply loving and affectionate, not to say prideful regard on their part, and I had found myself the possessor of four of the most delightful and stalwart champions any young sister could have dreamed of.

A perfect summer term in that fateful year of 1918 had only accentuated the sadness that took possession of me as the day of my graduation dawned. After the final farewell had been said to Miss Brandon and Miss Kate in the library, wherein their generous words of praise, affectionate pride and kindly admonition for the future had almost reduced me to tears, I retired with Pat to our study, where over cups of cocoa brewed for the last time in our leaky saucepan, we reviewed the triumphs and disasters of the past five years, and pondered not a little uncertainly on the new chapter that was to open with our emergence into the world that lay outside the sheltering walls of Downside House.

Nearly three months of idling was more than enough for me. I never could stand too much of having nothing specific to do. With the end of the war in November 1918, and the safe return of Hugh and Edward, a great restlessness overcame me. I didn't know what I wanted.

Mother, always quick to handle any given situation, firmly announced that she would like me to spend the next six months taking a course in Domestic Science at a school in town. "You don't know how important it is, dear, to have a good grounding in all that side of things before you have a home of your own to look after."

"I'm not thinking of having a home of my own," I laughed. "I'm quite happy here."

Mother shot me a sly little glance as she put the finishing touches to her dress before going out to lunch. "It is never too soon to know these things, my child. Now where are my gloves?" Together we walked downstairs and as I watched her disappear down the street I was satisfied anew that if I looked as well as she did when I was middle-aged, I should be content. The slight greying at the temples, the fuller figure, the kindly little lines around the eyes, merely accentuated her basic good looks and charm. If I ever had a home

of my own, I thought to myself, I would not want to marry a doctor. It was a life calling for so much endurance and self-sacrifice and tact. Your husband was always at the beck and call of everyone else. The army might be worse, though, or the navy with its constant moves and separations. Well, thank goodness, I had no romantic leanings. A slight feeling of guilt assailed me as I remembered how much I loved the flowers and candy that my male friends brought me regularly, but it was the gifts and not the giver which really appealed. I had always said that my ambition lay centered around a farm, but nobody of the opposite sex had ever showed up who had the slightest leanings in that direction.

I thoroughly enjoyed my six months of good grounding, and the course was only just completed when Pat, with whom my friendship was as close as ever, telephoned one evening to ask if I could accompany her on a six weeks' trip to France, Switzerland and Italy. The maiden aunt who shared their home was an ardent traveler who couldn't wait to get going again after four years of deprivation.

The family were all in favor of the idea, and in the most perfect spring weather we visited Germany, France, Switzerland and Italy. Auntie knew all the answers, in all the languages. Clad always in a tailored suit with various "fronts" added which were usually flapping in the breeze, and armed only with a vast amount of energy in her small body and a large, badly folded umbrella, she bore us on our triumphant way with the least possible difficulty. The only anxious moment I had was when, having engaged in an argument with a frontier official on the railway station as we left Switzerland, she leaned out of the window as we slowly steamed away and soundly whacked the unsuspecting gentleman across the back with her umbrella, to show that Britannia still ruled the waves, metaphorically speaking.

Chapter 4

THREE DAYS had passed since my return home and my suitcases still remained half unpacked. The old restlessness which had plagued me so often in the weeks after my graduation returned with renewed force as an annoyance and a challenge. Standing somewhat uncertainly on the threshold of the future, I longed for a definite way of life, a purpose, a plan, an explanation of the meaning of it all. At the moment I did not seem to fit in anywhere. The social round failed to satisfy me for long nor did the extensive reading which occupied a good many hours of my spare time.

Even to Father, as ever my close companion, I could not explain what was in my mind. The words that I needed either would not come or they disappeared into thin air when I tried to say them. It was something that was in me, that would not be stilled. I had a deep and unsatisfied longing to find a path that only I could tread, something that I could only do myself, and successfully at that. I still had moments of doubt in my abilities, fostered probably by my early years of struggle against the boys.

The thought of training for any career which would keep me chained to a city office filled me with dismay. I had no desire to go in for nursing or medicine or teaching. I came to the end of one particularly depressing day by wishing from the bottom of my heart I could change places with Pat who had only one desire in life, to become a successful journalist, and who was already enrolled in a school that was to train her for her cherished ambition.

The following morning I was walking through the hall with some mail for Father's desk when I saw a messenger boy dismounting at the gate with a telegram. Anybody who happened to be in had authority to open all telegrams for the house at once, as in some instances they demanded immediate action. I signed the slip, handed the pencil back to the boy and slowly opened the envelope. At first

the message seemed somewhat unintelligible. The signature didn't even register, it was merely signed "George." George! Why, there was only one George that I had ever known. Mother had mentioned casually the possibility of his coming home this year, but it hadn't been anything very definite. Quickly I scanned the message again: LEAVE PUT FORWARD, EXPECT REACH LONDON 16TH, HOPE I MAY COME DIRECT AND FIND YOU ALL AT HOME, LOVE, GEORGE.

For some moments I merely stared at the printed message. Without warning the past had projected itself into the present with all the force of an unexpected explosion. I couldn't imagine George being back again, it didn't seem the slightest bit possible. He had been seven thousand miles away for so long that distance had become a habit, and now within a few days he would be here again, standing in this very spot and I had almost forgotten what he looked like! Once more I read the message. The sixteenth it said . . . the sixteenth . . . why, I was going to Pat on the sixteenth to help get ready for her sister's wedding on the twentieth. I couldn't get out of that, and I didn't want to either.

Wedging the telegram under a bowl of flowers on the hall table I went slowly upstairs to finish unpacking my suitcases. But somehow the suitcases remained as they were. Memory after memory came flooding through my mind. I could feel again in a rather shamefaced way the frantic excitement that preceded George's arrivals in the past. I had always been so frank and open in my devotion to him and my longing to make him feel at home. I remembered the pangs that I had suffered when he had left for India, the measles, the roses! It was all very childish and silly and now suddenly he was coming back again. I only hoped he had a short memory.

It turned out that Mother had had a letter from him while I was away saying that his leave might be put forward, and that if it was, he would cable and come across from Marseilles on the boat train, arriving in London on May sixteenth.

In the excitement of my return Mother had forgotten to tell me. It did not take much persuasion on her part to make me see that I should have to postpone my visit to Pat for a day or so. I could still be there by the twentieth and yet be home for George's arrival. He

was accorded the guest room along the landing from my room. I had restrained myself from putting a bowl of flowers on his dressing table. He probably had outgrown these artistic feminine attentions I said to myself firmly. A book on big game hunting might be more appropriate if I had had one handy.

It was a stifling hot evening when Mother and I drove to the station to meet the boat train, but she looked cool and fresh in her green linen suit and flower-crowned hat. I was wearing a brown picture straw with a cluster of pink silk roses high across the front, and a matching brown crepe dress that the boys had given me for Easter.

Hustling crowds filled the station. It was the first of the warm weekends, and the pre-summer vacationists appeared to be in joyful mood, though apparently as many people were coming into town as leaving it.

Poor Mother hated crowds and she decided to install herself on a bench while I went to inspect the notice board. A perspiring porter was writing slowly and carefully the latest bulletins concerning the departure and arrival of trains. His cap was on the back of his head and rivulets of moisture trickled unrestrainedly down the back of his grimy neck, leaving the skin clear and white underneath. Every few moments he had to stop to answer the questions of seemingly frenzied travelers. Dodging my head from side to side I managed to read that the boat train from Dover was thirty minutes late.

"Well, I will sit here, darling," Mother said when I told her, "you can wander round. I know you would prefer to do that."

There were people everywhere rushing, pushing, laughing, waiting. I wondered if anyone else was waiting like me, to meet somebody they had not seen in over six years. Somebody who had once been very dear and who had suddenly disappeared, rather like the end of a movie when the screen goes blank and the lights come on, and you realize it is all over! I couldn't begin to analyse my present feelings. I had tried saying over and over again since I had awakened at daylight, "George is coming back today," "This evening you will see George again," "in less than twelve hours George will be back in this house once more," "you will be talking to George before today is over"; but it was no use, I just could not make it real. I had had the same sort of feeling before I went abroad with Pat, as we looked at

travel folders. Cologne Cathedral, the Eiffel Tower, a Swiss village! You will soon be there I told myself, but it didn't mean a thing . . . not until I saw them.

As I paced the platform beside the tracks, I wondered for the millionth time what George would be like now. Whether he would look quite different. Perhaps he had grown a beard or become a pompous ass. I smiled to myself as I discarded such ridiculous notions. George had always been very meticulous about his appearance, and pompous was the last thing he could ever become. He had probably forgotten about me. I must have been an awful little pest to him at times, I mused, with my doglike devotion and my endless difficulties which he had always handled so successfully.

But that all seemed like a distant dream now. All I really knew of him were the little thumbnail sketches I had had secondhand from his letters to Mother, and occasionally direct to me. We had heard in a roundabout way that he was doing wonderfully well at his job. Father had a patient who was on the board of directors of George's firm, whose headquarters were in London, and he had told Father more than once that George had all the qualities that go to make an ideal Planter . . . tact, firmness, integrity and abundant good humour and understanding. It sounded very much like the George I used to know but it didn't bring him any closer, or really give one any idea of what sort of a person he had grown into, or what he looked like now.

I wondered if he would be pleased to see me, even though I had been horribly lax in writing to him beyond Christmas and birthdays, and once or twice a year in between. As the minutes passed and it was almost time for the train to arrive, I suddenly wanted to turn and run. I wished I had let Mother come on her own. And yet what had I got to be so self-conscious about I asked myself firmly. My hat suited me, my slip wasn't showing, my nose wasn't shiny, or was it? Just to make sure, I pulled out my compact and took a hasty look in the badly cracked mirror. No, all was well and suddenly Mother was beside me, an excited little smile on her face.

"Here comes the train, dear." She pointed to the track. A puffing, panting giant of a locomotive was slowly nosing its way along the platform for all the world like an enormous, inflated slug. Mother stepped quickly to the wide-open iron gates, but for no particular

reason I held back. In a matter of moments she began to wave. I stood on tiptoe and peered into the distance, but I could not see anyone faintly resembling George. A tall broad-shouldered man dressed in grey with a paper under his arm was striding up the platform way ahead of everyone else. I took a step forward in order to get a better view. The stranger was apparently waving his paper frantically at Mother, for she had intensified her efforts, and as he came nearer and nearer the gate, my heart suddenly seemed to somersault. Could this be George? Had the slim young idol of my childhood days, with the deep grey eyes and the soft fair hair, grown into this bronzed, mature, incredibly good-looking man who had already seized Mother in a fast embrace and seemed at the same time to be looking over her shoulder, searching the distance? I could hardly believe my eyes, but my ears could not deceive me, for the next moment I heard the old familiar voice as George laughingly caught my hands in his.

"Why Monica—" For a second he seemed to be nonplussed. "Is this Monica . . . it's almost incredible." George turned to Mother as if looking for confirmation.

"I thought you'd be very much surprised, my dear," Mother laughed, "but I have to admit it is Monica."

"Surprised isn't the word." He turned and looked hard at me once more. The station seemed suddenly to be empty to me and my heart was racing most uncomfortably. "And you're nearly as tall as I am."

"You've grown a bit yourself, George," I laughed. I couldn't think of a single sensible thing to say, and Mother as usual took immediate command of the situation.

"Let's get out of this crowd," she urged, "it's too hot for words."

During the short drive from the station in the car, we all talked at once and every time I looked at George he was looking at me. I felt as if the mantle of Rip Van Winkle had suddenly fallen on my shoulders. In the place of the slim, somewhat shy young man I remembered I was confronted with a personality that could be felt, a poise and self-possession and charm that were magnetic. The fun, the gaiety, the old wry humour remained, but the years that had passed had developed a force of character, a quiet strength that none but the blindest could fail to see. What *savoir-faire* I possessed, and

I thought I had acquired quite a little, seemed temporarily to have deserted me. It was as if I had received a sudden decisive punch in the solar plexus.

The reunion with the family was little short of riotous. Gales of laughter rent the air as old familiar scenes and happenings were re-lived.

George sat next to me at dinner, and although we laughed and chatted in an outwardly normal manner there was an indefinable sense of shyness between us, a certain acute awareness of each other which I found strangely disturbing. I was almost thankful when the meal was over and we had all crowded into the den.

From my corner in the rocking chair where I was pretending to knit the end of a sock for Johnny, I had a perfect vantage point from which to observe George without appearing to do so. As he chatted back and forth with Mother and the boys, answering endless questions about his job, his tiger hunting, the dense jungle, the strange ways of Orientals, I was more interested in him than in what he was saying.

The innate gentleness of disposition and immense capacity for fun remained unchanged, but I could nevertheless tell instinctively that if the occasion demanded he could be tough.

My heart swelled with pride as I looked at him, and almost at the same time it contracted most painfully. The feeling of pride was stirred by a sudden sense of possession. He was mine . . . he always had been—my pal, my protector, my dearest companion . . . had been! But that was in the days of long ago when he had been a lonely, shy, homeless boy who had responded with deep fidelity to the love and warmth that had enveloped him in our home. That was in the days before he had become a man and gone to the faraway places of the world.

I looked swiftly across at him, only to meet his steady gaze fixed firmly on me, an enigmatic expression on his handsome face. I prayed that the gathering dusk might cover the swift flush that, try as I would, I could not prevent from suffusing my cheeks. Furious with myself I dropped my eyes to my knitting and kept them there for the remainder of the evening.

A telegram to Pat explained somewhat unconvincingly my regret

at having to postpone my arrival as arranged, and during the first days that George was with us Mother and I went with him on shopping expeditions, helping him to choose new clothes. We lunched out and dined out and went to the theatre with the boys. He was such a satisfactory person to go out with. We always seemed to get a taxi or a table in a restaurant, or tickets for a show, with a minimum of delay and confusion. He had a way with people which was quiet but immensely effective. One would think he had never been away from London, instead of buried in the jungle for nearly six and a half years. When he was out by himself at the office, or at the dentist, or with the boys, I was restless until he came back. I passed the time with all sorts of unnecessary turning out of drawers and closets in my room. I did endless errands for Mother and went for long walks round the park. I walked so quickly I could hardly keep up with myself, my mind more or less a blank except for an awareness of the soft breeze in my hair and the gentle song of the birds in the large elm trees. As I came in sight of the house on my return, I deliberately slowed my pace to a snail's crawl. George might be back and looking out of the window. I wasn't going to let him get the impression that I was in any hurry to get home.

One evening I thought that he and Mother were never coming back at all. Mother had specially wanted to go to the opera to hear an Italian basso profundo perform. Only two tickets were available and though I didn't believe George wanted to go at all, he gallantly offered to take Mother. Everyone else seemed to shy at the mere suggestion. Johnny quite frankly said he thought opera was an effeminate occupation for any man, and he and I played cards hour after weary hour while they were gone. As midnight approached I was secretly in anguish. Perhaps there had been an accident. My vivid imagination laid Mother and George under every taxi and bus in the city of London. I dreaded to hear the phone in case it should be the hospital calling with its tragic news, and begging us to be calm and brave and to hope for the best! Johnny finally lost patience with my inattention and was about to dress me down soundly when the door opened and Mother came floating in, vivacious and exhilarated, followed by George who had the most quizzical expression on his face.

"I'm so sorry to be so late, dears," Mother threw her wrap onto a chair, "but really Castonio was wonderful, superb. It was quite amazing how he brought down the house, wasn't it George?"

George had seated himself on the footstool beside Johnny and was lighting a cigarette.

"I should think he could bring down a whole row of houses," he grinned broadly at us. "I've never heard such a racket in my life."

"Why you rascal," Mother laughed, "you looked as if you were thoroughly enjoying it."

"I was." George winked at me. "I was completely fascinated, I have never seen anybody go through such contortions and live."

I wondered at the moment if I was going to live very long myself. I felt as if I were going to have the flu or something equally unpleasant. After pouring everyone some coffee from the large Thermos jug, I excused myself on the grounds of a splitting headache and went to bed, taking with me a sense of utter confusion as I caught the look of concern on George's face as he opened the door for me and said goodnight.

Sleep, however, was impossible. I turned my pillows a hundred times, dragged the covers over me and kicked them back again till they were a tangled heap on the floor. Endless drinks of water, cooling sprays of cologne, windows flung vigorously up from the bottom with clatter enough to disturb the whole house helped not the slightest. Nothing was of any avail. I was in a complete and undiagnosable ferment. Oh, what on earth was the matter with me, I asked myself furiously. Why had I not gone to Pat as arranged? Why had George suddenly come back like this and stirred such a mad, strange, uncomfortable turmoil inside me? It was as if a treasured possession long lost had suddenly been restored, but for some unaccountable reason could not be claimed. He probably thought of me still as just a child, petted, spoiled, though grown to womanhood. Why shouldn't he? And why should I care anyhow, I asked myself a thousand times? He was part of the past, not of the present or the future. I hadn't bothered particularly to tie the knot very fast in the little chain that had linked us so closely in our childhood days. I had been careless over writing, almost disinterested as time had passed. I hadn't even wanted to stay in town to see him again. Now that he was back and the sight of him had hit me with an impact

that I was at a loss to explain, I was miserable and acting like a complete idiot.

Oh, well, it was quite fruitless to go on like this, I told myself firmly, and utterly stupid too. In a couple of weeks or so he would be off to Scotland and that was that, which thought didn't comfort me in the slightest. Somewhere, somehow, something had happened to me. I wished I could call Father and have him bring me a dose of the peppermint mixture he used to give me when I was restless as a child. I wanted Mother to come and turn my pillows and leave her flower-scented kiss on my uncomfortably hot forehead. I wanted anything and everything and nothing all at once, and I was furious with myself for being so childish. Hours later I fell into a troubled, dreaming sleep. I was a princess again with silver bracelets . . . my lap was full of rabbits in the woods of the farm. . . . "I couldn't bear it if you should be unhappy, Chicken" . . . measles . . . a box of pink roses . . .

When I eventually came downstairs for breakfast next morning there was no sign of life anywhere, but propped up beside my cup on the dining-room table was a note for me in George's handwriting. Eagerly I tore it open. It said: "Hope you are feeling all right again, Monica dear. How about having dinner with me this evening down by the river at Richmond." The lines tumbled one into the other as I read. "Sorry I have to dash out to the dentist now and then on to the office, but I will be back around 4 o'clock. G."

Dinner with George down by the river! Perhaps now I should be able to recapture some of the old carefree sense of companionship and break down this stifling feeling of separation. I was walking on air all day, and matters were improved still more by Father's not needing the car after five as he had to attend a hospital meeting, so that we could have it, he said, for as long as we liked.

Normally it only took me about fifteen minutes to get dressed, but for once I couldn't make up my mind what to wear. I put on and took off a suit, a printed shantung, a green crepe, and finally settled for a tailored pink linen and no hat. I'd take a silk scarf to tie down my unruly curls, though I loved the wind in my hair, and maybe I'd better include my cape in case I needed it. I was horrified to find I had been nearly an hour in this state of tormented indecision.

During the drive out of the city and along the picturesque Thames

side streets, his mood was one of quiet jubilation. Perhaps he had had a successful meeting at the office. We chatted lightly about this and that; we were terribly polite and dreadfully unnatural.

The hotel lobby was crowded as we entered. George steered me towards the headwaiter who was talking to a bellboy by the dining-room door. Yes, the table was in readiness, would we care to dine right away?

"You go ahead, Monica." George took my cape. "I'll join you in a moment."

I followed the waiter to a table in the far corner of the room, looking on the river. I should love to own an old place like this, I thought as I put my gloves and pocketbook down on the wide window ledge. The red-brick ivy-covered inn was as old as time itself. Thick oak beams pitted and gnarled with the years ran full length across the low ceilings. Casement windows flanked the immaculate green lawns which sloped gently to the water's edge. Centuries before, kings and queens had spent their leisure hours on these very reaches of the Thames.

Suddenly, a venerable grey-haired waiter was standing at my elbow with an enormous, beautifully painted menu. At the same moment I saw George threading his way through the crowded room. He was gently mopping his forehead with his handkerchief and I noticed he had a little red mark at the side of his head where his hat had been pressing.

"Ah, this is grand," he smiled, pulling out his chair. "I hope it meets with your approval?"

"It's perfect," I answered quickly, "it couldn't be nicer."

There was a certain air of intimacy about this table tucked away in the corner with its bowl of lovely pink roses perfuming the summer evening stillness. Surely, I felt, it will be possible for us to be natural with each other here, but my heart was beating a little too rapidly for comfort.

"I thought I was never going to be able to get you to myself."

George had lighted a cigarette, he was looking directly at me and all of a sudden he seemed to be quite serious. There was something in that look that went through me like an electric shock.

"I'm sorry I've been such a hopeless correspondent," I said rather

lame. It was a feeble sort of remark but it was the first thing that came into my head. "I really meant to write more often."

"I didn't expect you to," he answered quickly and reassuringly.

"How long are you home for?" I went on rather hurriedly. I felt somehow out of my depth, and I was searching frantically for some means of getting ourselves onto a basis.

"Just three months," and again the same straight direct look met my eyes. "I had the choice of waiting another year and getting six months, or coming now for a short leave. I just couldn't wait another year." He smiled slowly.

I looked quickly out of the window and for a few brief moments the figure of the waiter was between us as he placed the dishes on the table. Only three short months! I stifled an involuntary sigh, and then he would be gone again for another spell of years.

"Do you really like living out there, George?" He was passing me the salt and pepper.

"Yes, I do, I love it," there was no hesitancy in his reply. "I am very interested in my job and the jungle has always appealed to me." For a second or two he paused, then added, "I wonder what you'd think of it all?"

"I should think it would be fascinating." I hoped my voice did not betray what was really in my heart, that life with him anywhere on the face of the globe would be wonderful. "Of course it's hard to visualise it even after all you've told us," I went on, and I prayed that he had never noticed how little attention I had paid to all he had been telling us since he came back! Neither of us seemed to be particularly interested in what we were eating.

"Can you imagine a good deal of loneliness, a lot of heat, quite a few wild animals . . . and no shops?"

We both laughed at this last gentle dig.

"Do you think that shops are the be-all and end-all of life?" I bantered.

Behind the quizzical expression on George's face I sensed somehow that he was gently probing, trying me out, watching the effect on me of his every word. It was an agonising business!

"My dear girl," he teased, "don't try to tell me that a day's shopping isn't meat and drink to every woman. I know better!"

"Well, maybe it is," I conceded, "once in a while, but how do you get along if you don't have anywhere to shop? Where do you buy your food?"

"The cook gets chickens and eggs and potatoes and so on at the local bazaar on Sundays. Everything else, groceries included, has to be ordered from Calcutta eight hundred miles away!"

"For goodness sake," I laughed in amazement, "that certainly is a novel way of housekeeping."

"That is only one of the many inconveniences," he smiled across at me. "We have no electricity, no telephones and all the water has to be carried in from a well."

With his eyes fixed on me as they were, I couldn't even attempt to imagine life with no electricity or telephones. Quickly I pulled myself together.

"Do you have many neighbours, I mean near enough for any social life?" It was as good a question as any and I didn't honestly care!

"Just a few scattered over about thirty miles." George was stroking the back of his head, an old trick that I remembered, resorted to in moments of inward agitation.

"I have one Scottish assistant with me on the plantation," he went on quietly. "He and I spend most of our spare time fishing and shooting."

For a moment neither of us spoke and all at once the atmosphere suddenly became tense, charged with something that I could feel from my head to my toes. My heart started to bound again. Then George lit yet another cigarette and looked at me almost searchingly.

"Does it sound like a very impossible way of life, Monica?"

Somehow I knew that on my answer hung the whole structure of our relationship together. The note in his voice touched my heart, gave me the feeling that he was quietly suffering and that in some way I was the reason for the emotion that he was striving to conceal.

"I think it sounds like a rather lovely way of life," I answered against the tumult of my beating heart, and to cover my confusion I took one of the roses from the bowl in front of me and buried my nose in it.

"Put it in your dress," George said, "it matches it exactly . . . and your cheeks as well. Did you think I hadn't noticed?"

As I raised my eyes he was smiling quietly and a great sense of relief seemed to be reflected in his voice. I could feel it instinctively, it was as though we had with difficulty scaled a high peak successfully and were resting gently before the next ascent.

"You have grown up just exactly as I thought you would from your photographs." He was feeling in his breast pocket for something.

"What photographs? I never sent you any photographs." My voice sounded far, far away.

"Ever seen these before?" There was an expression on his face of pride, a subtle glimmer of victory. He handed me a little package that he had taken from his note case and, slipping his hands into his pockets, he leaned back in his chair.

I opened the envelope quickly and glanced inside. They were photographs . . . snapshots . . . me on graduation day, me on the playing field, me on the lawn at Downside with those awful bloomers showing, me on a horse at the Farm, me in a party frock and Red-riding-hood cloak, me at about six months or so clasping a woolly lamb. A flush spread swiftly over my face.

"Why George," I cried out, "where on earth did you get these awful things?"

"Some I've had for years," he smiled broadly, "the others I asked your mother to send me from time to time . . . you didn't think I was going to let you get away from me altogether, did you?"

I looked quickly at him as he held out his hand across the table for the pictures, and there was a look of extreme gentleness on his face which swept me back in memory to the tall fair boy who had times without number turned my sorrow into joy, but there was something else in his expression that sent a sudden wild, pulsating current of emotion surging through me, something behind the gentleness that I had never seen before, something that shook me to my depths. As I passed him back the little package, his hand closed over mine with a grip that almost made me cry out.

"Darling," I heard him say, and his voice was not entirely steady, "I am never going to let you go again . . . never."

I returned the pressure of his hand and it seemed as if the sound of mighty rushing waters filled my ears.

"Oh, George." I leaned my head on my hand and closed my eyes. "It's been such an awful week. I just . . . I can't explain . . . I . . ." Oh, what were words anyhow when George loved me, and we were sitting holding hands across the dining table for everyone to see!

"You don't have to explain anything, it's been the same for me too." His face looked pale against the softly shaded light. "Shall we go down by the river," he said after a moment, "there's such a crowd in here."

I loosened his hand gently. I had forgotten all about everyone else in the room. George picked up my bag and my gloves and we walked through the open French doors beyond the check room, out onto the wooded lawn. A fat yellow moon was slowly rising over the fields across the river. I was walking on air, conscious only of the fact that George was holding me firmly by the elbow, and that he had said he was never going to let me go again. As we turned into a narrow path flanked by tall fir woods along the water's edge, a sudden chill wind blew through the trees and I shivered slightly. George loosed my arm.

"You must have your cape, darling, wait a moment."

He stepped back and wrapped my cape around my shoulders and as he did so he gently kissed the back of my neck. Swiftly I turned into his waiting arms and as his lips found mine the whole world seemed folded together with us in the sweet ecstasy of that long first kiss. The fretting and the fussing and the agonising uncertainty of the past few days were over.

I do not remember how long we stood together in the deep cool darkness. A sudden shaft of moonlight through the trees cut a silver pathway down to the water. I know that we moved along the path, and when I slowly came back to earth, a few moments later, we were sitting under an old willow whose branches bent down into the river. George's arm was firmly round my waist, my head resting on his shoulder.

"I haven't even asked you yet if you will marry me, darling."

"I could never think of marrying anyone else," I laughed.

"I've been in agony this past week."

"I've had my bad moments too, my sweet."

"What have you had bad moments about, Georgie?" The old familiar endearment slipped out unconsciously. I had not even thought of him as Georgie since my childhood days. His arm tightened around me.

"Well, to begin with, I had no idea how you felt about me . . . and then, it's a very big thing for any man to take a girl so far away from her home and her family to the sort of life I have chosen."

"But I want to go . . . terribly . . . and we love each other, don't we?" It was impossible for me then to visualise the problem from his point of view, or to have any idea of the struggle he had been having with himself over it all.

"That's just the point, darling. It's because I love you so deeply that I have asked myself a thousand times whether I have any right to submit you to the loneliness of the jungle and all the discomforts of life so far from civilisation." He smothered a sigh and I rubbed my face against his cheek.

"Heaps of other women have lived in the jungle," I protested.

"Some have," he answered quietly, "but many have found they just couldn't take it."

"But I should have you," I slipped my arm around his neck. "I couldn't be lonely anywhere with you."

"I have to be out long hours on the plantation, you know," he was running his fingers slowly through my curls, "and for months it is very hot and there is literally nothing to do except what you can devise for yourself. I couldn't bear you ever to regret your decision."

"Now, don't say another word. We belong together, we always belonged. We have joined hands now and we are going forward to face the future together, always."

He caught me to him, kissing my throat, my eyes, my lips. All the loneliness of his life, the doubts, the fears, the holding back seemed to meet and find release in the depth and ardour of those kisses.

Chapter 5

M^Y IMMEDIATE family apparently had been in about as much of a turmoil as George and I had. They could hardly wait for the obvious crisis to break. I had been serenely unaware that anyone but myself had noticed my flagging appetite and somewhat strange and aloof reaction to the daily happenings. There was genuine and sincere jubilation all round. It was not until many years later that I was to realize with deep and heartfelt gratitude and not a little shame just exactly what it had cost Mother and Father to release their only daughter so unselfishly.

There was one stipulation laid down by Father, however, which hit me like a blow between the eyes. He insisted that I had to wait to get married for at least three months after George returned to Assam, in order that I might think the whole thing over in detail before I took the plunge. He emphasized gently my youth, my impulsiveness, the loneliness of jungle life in contrast to the life to which I was accustomed, the separation from family and friends. Above all he wanted me to be certain of my feelings about George when he was not with me every day. Deep down I could see Father's wisdom and good judgment. I respected and loved him so much, and I had acquired a sufficient measure of self-control that I agreed to his request without any argument, though it cost me several sleepless nights and some bitter tears in George's arms.

"I shall not change," I wept, "it seems so silly to separate us again, doesn't it?"

"I know you won't change, darling, but I can see his point of view. I naturally feel rather guilty in taking you away, and they want you to be certain."

"Oh, I know all that . . . I see it . . . but I am certain of how I feel and I can't bear to part with you all over again."

"I can't either," there was a deep, poignant note in his voice, "but three months is really not long." Immediately, as always, he turned

to the bright side of things. "I shall have the bungalow repainted all through and rethatched, you will be busy trousseau hunting and visiting. The time will pass like a flash." He tilted my chin and kissed my tear-stained eyes. "No thorn, no rose, remember, and we shall be glad we did as your parents wish. They have been so generous and fine over it all, haven't they?"

"Yes, they have," I admitted readily.

"Tomorrow we are going to our spot by the river," the old resolute firmness had returned to George's voice, "and I have something for you to see." George had brought home four beautiful rings for me to choose from. Each was as lovely as the other and I had finally selected a deep blue sapphire surrounded with diamonds which I was afraid was the most expensive. It had been inscribed with words which I was yet to see.

The following day, safely installed by the river with rugs and a picnic basket, I opened the velvet case. The beauty of the ring almost took my breath away. On the inside was written "to my only love, now and for ever."

"This is to replace the silver bracelets," George said as he slipped the ring on my finger, "and if you get too fat and have to have it cut off I shall disown you promptly," and gathering me in his arms he kissed me with a passionate intensity that set my heart singing like a bird. The sound of a gentle pit-a-pat suddenly became audible, and the next moment a fat and chuckling toddler appeared round a bend in the narrow wooded path. Dark curls danced above his blue eyes, and his little pink tongue was protruding from his mouth. He clutched a handful of daisies in his chubby hands and, staggering more than walking towards us, he deposited the flowers in George's lap. A long and un-intelligible pronouncement accompanied his gift. He clasped his hands together with a delicious accupgle.

"Oh, what a lovely child," I exclaimed.

"Yes, isn't he a picture . . . where is your mother, young man?" George asked as he gathered the daisies into a little bouquet. The baby just looked at us, his hands still clasped, then suddenly he extended one small foot on which was obviously a brand new red shoe. Before we could sufficiently admire the shoe, a young girl came racing down the path.

"Oh, Dickie, you monkey, come back at once." She gathered the

round bundle into her arms and smiled proudly at us. "I hope he wasn't disturbing you . . . he just escaped."

"He'd never disturb us," I assured her quickly, "I think he is the most perfect child I have ever seen."

"We're having a picnic too, further back, and I suddenly missed him. Say 'bye, bye' Dickie to the nice people." But Dickie merely put his thumb in his mouth and snuggled up against his mother.

"Well, how many of those would you like?" George asked, smiling as he tucked the daisies into the front of my dress.

"Oh, about six at least," I said. "I simply love them."

George had lighted his pipe and was quietly surrounding himself with clouds of smoke. I sensed that the little silence that had fallen between us was the forerunner of something he was trying to put into words, and in this I was not mistaken.

"Tell me," he said after another moment or two, "do you know all that you should know about these things?" He spoke rather carelessly and his eyes were on the grass, where he started digging away at a root with his thumb. "I mean, 'the facts of life.'"

I looked away towards the river. It was the first time we had actually spoken of the subject and for a few seconds I didn't know what to reply. He would never believe how little I did know. How stupid I had been always to head poor Mother off when she had attempted on various occasions to talk to me "about something, now you are growing up." But I always had. Emily's revelations by way of Pat had unquestionably stuck in my mind and rather than open such a subject I had invariably told Mother that I knew all about everything and she would gladly change the subject of conversation.

Now I longed to get the whole subject straightened out once and for all, and yet even with George I couldn't bring myself either to disclose my rather sketchy knowledge, or to tell him of Emily's highly coloured discourse on the subject of men and their somewhat wild and explosive characteristics, which over the years I had come to discredit through my own powers of listening, observation and reasoning. No, there was nothing for it, I must just go on pretending and hope for the best!

"Of course I know all about everything." I laughed a little unnaturally as I gently tweaked his ear. "You don't get to my age

without a pretty good knowledge of the facts of life do you?" Even to me there was something in that bold statement that did not ring quite true. I felt as if the entire surface of my body must be suffused with the flush that suddenly covered my face.

George looked hard at me for a few moments, and then knocking out his pipe he sat up and slipped his arm around me.

"I have a feeling that deep down somewhere you are a little afraid. Promise me you are never going to be afraid of anything with me?"

I could feel his heart pounding as he bent to kiss me, and for a fraction of a second I was on the point of telling the truth, but "I promise, Georgie," was all that I could say, and the next moment we were on firm ground again and the opportunity was lost.

The twelve short weeks remaining of George's leave were eighty-four days of exquisite happiness. We spent almost every weekend at the Farm, riding, fishing, planning. With my head cushioned on George's lap in the evenings I tried to bring reality to the word pictures he so carefully painted of the jungle life and its surroundings which were to be my own. We were going to extend the living room in the old thatched bungalow that stood on a hill beside the river, put in large bay windows at each end to catch a perpetual view of the snows on the distant Himalaya Mountains. All kinds of English and tropical flowers grew to perfection so that a garden was no problem, given time to devote to it, and joy of joys to me, I could have as many dogs and cats, cows and chickens as I liked. There was apparently plenty of room for everybody. I already had rose arbours in full bloom, kennels full of spaniel puppies and baskets of soft black kittens! The timely warnings about malaria and leeches, sunstroke and snakes, passed by me like a gentle cloud across a distant landscape and had no more significance.

I often wondered what George could find so enchanting in a fanciful, impulsive, light-hearted, rather over-sensitive creature like me. I was such a contrast to the steady, well-balanced calm of his make-up with its deep channels of controlled emotions and simple philosophy of life. Though it was only in our very closest moments that I had ever been able to probe behind his natural reticence, he believed that one should do the very best one could at all times and

give the other fellow a break. As the days slipped by I knew more and more that there was something in him to which I responded like the echo of a song, and I was content.

How I was going to get to India had, of course, been discussed. It was quite impossible for Father to leave his practice and equally impossible for Mother to leave Father. The boys were absorbed in carving out a career for themselves. Many and varied were the conferences on ways and means. Many were the hours in which I skated on the near edge of despair, as it seemed impossible that I could go alone; equally impossible that I could be put in charge of the Captain or Purser since George was strangely against any such idea. Then one of those sudden twists of fate settled the question in twenty-four hours, almost on the eve of George's departure. He was in the shipping offices making some inquiry about luggage and ran into some old friends who had just arrived from Bombay on three months' special leave.

Colonel and Mrs. Burney had traveled out with George when he had returned to India over six years before. He had met them at the bridge table on the ship and they had remained friends chiefly through correspondence. On learning about me they had immediately offered to take me back with them, and not only that, but insisted on having the wedding from their bungalow in Bombay.

They came with George to meet the family and at once everyone liked everyone else. Although they had no children of their own, Mrs. Burney was very motherly and the Colonel was great fun, and very shortly Mother and Mrs. Burney were busily discussing all the details of clothes suitable for my new life in the tropics. Mrs. Burney had a married sister in Bombay to whom she was going to write at once, asking her to start making plans for the wedding, so that we could be married on the day of my arrival.

During the last week of our time together George and I spent some agonising moments, but we agreed to free our parting from the strangling fetters of tears on my part and obvious misery on his. We would simply look ahead and count the days till our wedding with a blue pencil mark on the calendar each night at bedtime—and then he was gone.

Father had taken a few hours off and driven us to the coast at Dover

where George was to join the cross channel steamer that connected with the boat train for Marseilles. When we had waved him out of sight in the August twilight, Father and I drove the seventy-odd miles back to town in complete silence. My hand was clasped tightly in his and there was something like a rock in my throat.

Chapter 6

FOR A WHILE after George left the family surrounded me with a loving aloofness which was as warm and comforting as a soft blanket. Father and Mother discovered endless things that they felt only I could do, and I had no excuse for being lonesome, but it was in the still small hours that I suffered some of my worst pangs. Quite clearly, then, I realised to the full that I could not see George again until I had parted from my adored family not just for a weekend or a few weeks, with them only a telephone call away, but for a term of years, and a distance of over six thousand miles with no telephones within range at all.

No doubt it was exactly such grisly moments that my parents in their wisdom had wanted me to have. There is no better time to weigh up the pros and cons of any situation than in the grey light of dawn with no possibility of calling on any beloved human presence to bolster one's morale or throw the weight of their opinion and advice into the scales. Every aspect of the whole question I went over and over, and dim as my vision was about life in the jungle, heat, loneliness, wild animals and all the rest, I always came up with the same answer: where George was I wanted to be.

His letters were happy and confident but without the slightest suggestion of pressure or coercion. Whatever doubts he might have had he kept strictly to himself. He spoke quite frankly of the heat on his return, of a great sense of loneliness, of the disappointing tea crop and of one of his cocker spaniels having been bitten by a snake in the garden with little bad result. The bungalow was being repainted and rethatched and he was working on a few "secrets" for me. Any trace of apprehension or self-pity was entirely avoided.

It was not long before the family began to indulge in a subtle campaign of what they termed "taking me out of myself." In other words, I began to be treated to a series of parties and social occasions where I met different people, mostly of the opposite sex.

Thus the weeks became months. And then, almost before I realised it, Mother and Mrs. Burney were in a huddle over a suitable list for my trousseau. The list developed into the most exciting days of shopping, fittings, mountains of tissue paper and cardboard boxes and the gradual arrival of the most splendid wedding presents from patients and friends. There followed packers, wooden crates, final parties that were not without their heartache, photographers, new trunks and then the agonising parting with Mother and Father and the boys and all the dear familiar surroundings.

Three months almost to the day found me prostrate with seasickness in my cabin on the good ship *Mooltan* as she ploughed her almost acrobatic way through the heaviest seas she had encountered in the Mediterranean in many a long day.

Colonel and Mrs. Burney, both apparently weatherproof, lavished me with attention, and on the fifth day we slipped quietly into the Suez Canal at Port Said and I was immediately restored to health. As I walked up on deck of the now scarcely moving ship it seemed as if I must have somehow rubbed Aladdin's lamp. The whole world had changed.

The last I had seen of land or people had been a grey, wintry-looking Europe with the accustomed white faces, people clad in the sort of clothing with which I had always been familiar; here suddenly were brilliant sunshine, cloudless blue sky, black faces attached to black bodies clad in what looked like long flowing white nightgowns and crowned with bright red Fez caps; men waved and gesticulated at the ship as they jostled each other along the tow-path of the Canal. Everywhere as far as the eye could see was a vast expanse of sand on either side of the narrow waterway.

I felt that I could linger forever just where I was in the warmth of the sun and the peace after the storm, but Mrs. Burney insisted that I take part in the shipboard activities by day, and the dancing by night. Time slipped by and though the air as we left Aden was like a greenhouse I hardly noticed the intense humidity.

It was not until midnight on the last night of the voyage when my partner, a sedate judge of the Calcutta High Court, and I sat exhausted on deck after winning the Treasure Hunt, that I suddenly realized it was journey's end at last, that tomorrow I should see George again, and more unbelievable still, that it was to be our

wedding day. I excused myself as soon as I could and went to my cabin, but sleep was impossible. I never felt more awake in my life, and not only wide-awake and excited but a little uneasy, almost apprehensive. This was the way you probably felt the night before an operation, or having a baby, or all your teeth out, I told myself. You made your decision and it was something that you had to go through completely on your own in the sincere hope that everything would be all right in the end. Not that one's wedding day could be classed in any one of those rather grim categories, but suddenly Mother and Father and the boys and home seemed awfully far away.

I had worked myself up into quite a state by the time the first streak of dawn touched the open porthole. There wasn't a breath of air even with the fan going and I was bathed in perspiration. This was no way to go on, I told myself firmly. I'd take a bath and a couple of aspirins and make myself sleep. I wasn't going to fail, I'd made up my mind to that.

As I sat on the side of the bath while the water was running I realized that I was trembling. I was afraid, I told myself somewhat wildly, just plain downright afraid, and there it was. I ran my fingers around the delicate lace on the hem of my nightie. I thought of my lovely trousseau and what fun the boys had had at my expense, holding the frothy undergarments up against them, posing and simpering at each other while Mother, thoroughly enjoying their capers, had done her best not to laugh. One particularly pretty and feminine negligee had brought forth gales of laughter as Hugh had made some remark to Edward about its being "an incitement to violence," whatever that might mean. I wished I had talked with Father as I had so nearly done the night before I left. How I wished from the bottom of my heart I had never heard of Emily or any of her kind. Did other women get in a panic like this, I wondered, on their wedding mornings? Did they want suddenly to jump out of the window, stay in the bath forever, even run away? Perhaps, I told myself hopefully, I might fall in a faint just as we were preparing for bed. George, absolutely frantic, would pick me up in his arms and lay me on the sofa, send for the house physician, pretend we had been married for ten years. I should be ordered absolute quiet, lots of champagne, open windows, and absolutely no excite-

ment. But I wasn't the fainting sort. I remained in the most robust health, and at the moment I had never felt better.

As I ran the water I suddenly heard excited voices out in the alleyway. I couldn't quite make out what it was all about except that land was visible somewhere. That was enough for me. I forgot about the aspirin and everything else. If land was visible it must be India, the magic country that had always held for me such enchantment in the past, and which in a few short hours was going to hold my future forever in its grasp. Rushing into some clothes I joined the throng heading for the deck.

The beauty of the tropical sunrise as I walked out onto the deck almost took my breath away. A soft haze hung over a glasslike sea, and in all directions the sky was bathed in exquisite opalescent pinks and greens and blues. I had never before seen anything so beautiful. Not very far ahead a sandy coastline studded with palm trees gradually merged into what appeared to be a large group of white buildings. Here and there a domed roof was visible, and dotted over the water were numberless strange-looking little craft, their sails brightened and gleaming with the first touch of the morning sun. Always I shall remember that first glimpse of Oriental beauty. Somewhere in there George was waiting. The very thought of his nearness steadied me as nothing else could have done. I felt suddenly peaceful and calm, and, unromantic as it may have been, I was also terribly hungry. A notice was up on the deck to say that the ship would dock at midday and that breakfast would be served from 6.00 A.M. After a man-size helping of bacon and eggs I went down to my cabin and slept till Mrs. Burney awakened me about an hour before we were due to tie up.

I had told George that I would be wearing a pale green dress and roses in my hat so that he could find me more easily in a crowd, and it took me no time at all to slip into my crepe frock and leghorn hat, gather up my gloves and bag and join Colonel and Mrs. Burney on deck.

The harbor was alive with activity. Fussy little tugs like maiden aunts were busily shepherding their charges in and out of their appointed places for there were quite a number of other liners, cargo boats and oil tankers both entering and leaving the harbor. As we slowly nosed our way alongside, a sea of black and white faces

turned expectantly up towards our crowded decks. Everyone seemed to be gathered as near as possible to the gangways waiting to be lowered. Intense excitement pervaded the atmosphere. As we finally tied up and the gangways were lowered, a stream of officials, travel agents, telegraph boys and welcoming friends and relatives started swarming onto the ship. Vainly I searched the crowd for a sight of George but he was not to be seen anywhere, and I was just about to move myself to the second gangway towards the other end of the deck when Mrs. Burney excitedly grabbed my arm.

"Here he comes, dear, here he comes. He must have taken the other gangway."

And the next moment I saw George striding along the deck searching the crowd with his eyes, and with little regard for my surroundings I sped to meet him. Immediately he saw me and almost lifted me off my feet as he planted a resounding kiss on my lips.

He looked most elegant in his palm beach suit and streamlined solar topee and I could tell that he was absolutely bursting with excitement. Laughingly he slipped his hand through my arm and at that moment Colonel and Mrs. Burney joined us.

"Well, my boy, we've landed her safe and sound, thank goodness." Colonel Burney was warmly shaking George's hand and Mrs. Burney was so obviously happy and smiling one might have thought that it was her wedding day instead of mine.

"Let's get out of this racket and go and sit in the lounge," Colonel Burney said somewhat testily. "I want a drink. I can't stand this shipboard pandemonium."

We wandered into the somewhat quieter smoking room and seated ourselves on the comfortable sofas under the fan, while Colonel Burney ordered the drinks.

"What time is the wedding, George?" Mrs. Burney asked.

The mention of the wedding started a little fluttering sensation round my heart. I could hardly believe that the day had really arrived and I was conscious of George's eyes on me every second. I only wished that we could be alone together for a little while that I might steady myself in the strength of his apparent self-possession. "Three-thirty," he said. "We were not sure until late yesterday what time you would be docking."

"By the way, darling," he asked, "have you much luggage?"

"Forty-six pieces," I answered promptly as Mrs. Burney and I exchanged glances over our orange squash.

I have never known a man yet who wasn't allergic to luggage or packages in any sort of quantity! Colonel Burney let out a howl of delight as George raised his eyes to the ceiling in exaggerated concern.

"Gone are the days, my boy, when you could travel with a clean shirt and a toothbrush. I think our record was thirty-nine crates and two dogs."

"But mine aren't all clothes," I hastened to assure George. "I'm loaded with wedding presents and all sorts of stuff Mother packed. I really don't know half of what is there."

"I'll try not to mind," George teased, "but if we land after three transshipments and a trip up the river with no losses I shall consider we've done well!"

"Well, we're going to miss you very much, my dears," Mrs. Burney said quietly as she drained her glass. "If only Jack could be talked out of his beloved Kashmir valley for a change, we might be able to take a trip to the jungle and spend a vacation with you."

The mere suggestion of such heresy seemed to set poor Jack by the ears for he looked at his watch and changed the conversation hurriedly. "What is the program now, my dear?" He glanced at his wife sharply.

"You take George to the bungalow now and give him some lunch. I am going to take Monica for a short drive round Bombay before we go to the hotel. We'll have something to eat while we dress."

"Very well, my dear, let's get going." Together we walked out onto the deck. "And none of this bride's privilege, remember," Colonel Burney laughed. "I expect to see you both at the cathedral at three-thirty on the dot."

George gave my hand a quick squeeze and I followed Mrs. Burney to the gangway that led to the pier. On the pier she hailed a cab. "Bates—that's Jack's orderly—is to wait with our car in the hotel compound for us so that he is sure to be there when we are ready to go to the church." Mrs. Burney leaned out and handed our landing cards to an official at the dock gates. She then instructed the

driver, a most venerable-looking Indian resembling exactly one of the twelve apostles, with his grey beard and longish hair twisted around with a white turban, to take us on a certain route.

My first impressions of the Orient were of color, of smells and of beggars. The very deep blue of the sky in the hot sunshine found its complement in the multi-colored costumes of the seething black population that crammed the dusty streets, the gaily painted bullock-carts that moved slowly and deliberately along in striking contrast to the bright red and green of the small buses that tore by at frightening speed, their interiors packed with dark-skinned humanity, and many with their radiators pouring up clouds of steam which were apparently of little consequence. A tall thin figure in bright orange robes and with an open orange-colored parasol over his shorn head passed in front of our cab as we stopped for a traffic signal. Mrs. Burney said he was a Burmese priest and that the color of his robes was the mark of his calling. The policeman who was directing the traffic caught my eye as he, too, was under an umbrella; yet in spite of that he was waving both arms with the greatest freedom. As we came alongside him I saw that his umbrella was neatly attached to the leather belt of his trim uniform and he wore a bright scarlet turban most meticulously folded.

Mrs. Burney pointed out to me the various buildings. There were government offices, business offices, banks, and round many of them large masses of orange and yellow cannas, flaming red hibiscus, and deep purple bougainvillea bloomed in uninterrupted profusion. The streets were lined with small native stores, some selling brightly colored silks, some curios, and others all kinds of brass ware and pots and pans, most of which came from Japan. There were Chinese stores that specialized in making boots and shoes, while others concentrated on furniture. Coal-black crows wheeled incessantly over the refuse that lay untended in the gutters. Over all there was the most nauseating smell of hot, rancid fat.

"That's a smell you'll have to get used to, my dear," Mrs. Burney laughed when I asked her whatever it might be. "It's ghee, a fat refined from milk and used all over India for frying food. I must confess I dislike it intensely, too. You only get it in the native quarters, though; we shall soon be free of it as we drive further out." That was something to be thankful for, I told myself, for I was sure

that I never could get used to it, and it seemed to combine with the odor of warm manure which filled the air, for cows appeared to wander at will and take their naps in the middle of the sidewalk undisturbed, a crow or two perched comfortably on their backs.

What shocked me beyond all words were the beggars. Almost since we had left the pier, at intervals, one gruesome sight after another had met my eyes in the shape of maimed and twisted humanity. As we slowed down in the traffic at a corner, an old emaciated woman pushed the skinny little hands of a small girl with sightless eyes, whom she was leading, almost into the windows of the cab.

"Oh, poor little thing!" I couldn't help recoiling. "Has she had some sort of an accident, do you suppose?"

"She may have been born that way," Mrs. Burney answered quietly, "but I have heard it said that children have had their eyes put out in their infancy by their families who regarded the afflicted one as a source of income."

I could hardly believe my ears and I was thankful when we turned into a wide road that led by the sea and on up a hill which had a beautiful view of the bay. This was one of the European residential districts, and cool-looking white stone and red brick bungalows were dotted on either side of the broad road. Lovely gardens surrounded the houses filled with brightly flowering shrubs and tall palm trees, and the lawns were worthy of comparison with many of the best in England. In some of the gardens little white babies and toddlers were playing happily in charge of their Indian ayahs or nannies. It was a striking and refreshing contrast to the heat and dust and squalor of the city streets.

On the return drive I was immensely amused to see a tall Indian who had evidently decided to do a little quick laundry work en route to his appointment, wherever it might be. He had his umbrella open and was wearing only a loin cloth. Spread over the umbrella to dry was his bright scarlet shirt. Following closely behind, their even progress registered by a series of loud and completely unified grunts which evidently helped them to keep in step, came four rather frail-looking men carrying a piano balanced on their heads. If they had missed their step I couldn't imagine what would have happened, and as they approached the corner of the street they

seemed to miss by inches a sort of open-air barber's establishment. Two men were squatting on the curb facing two others. One man was having a haircut and the other, his arms stretched well above his head, was having a little close attention paid to his armpits.

"I think I shall remember this drive as long as I live," I laughed. "I have never had so many surprises in such a short time."

"It's fun though." Mrs. Burney said something to the driver. "It all keeps me amused even now, and the people are really most ingenious. You're just beginning to learn, my dear."

The next moment we turned off the street into a courtyard fresh and green with tall palms and colorful flowering shrubs, and pulled up at the hotel entrance.

The hotel was a large, straggling, dome-crowned, cream-washed stone building about six stories high that faced onto the bay, and George had reserved one of the nicest suites on the second floor. He had filled the sitting-room and the bedroom with masses of pink roses that scented the whole air with their perfume and on a small table by the window lay an exquisite wedding bouquet of white carnations and white roses arranged most artistically with a long trailing white creeper and white and silver ribbons. I was in more or less of a dream by this time, and Mrs. Burney took complete charge of the situation. As from nowhere appeared sandwiches, fruit and a bottle of champagne. She gently steered me into a bath, fixed my nails, brushed my dark curls till they shone like ebony, and decided that my already flushed cheeks needed no attention. My soft satin dress with its delicate seed-pearl embroidery had traveled most successfully, and the sight of it filled me with a sudden pang of heartache and longing for the family to be able to be with me on this day of days. A large sheaf of cables that I knew were from home lay on the dressing table, but I decided not to open them till George was with me. I knew that the fact that they could not be with me in the flesh was part of the price of the decision that I had made. Mrs. Burney persuaded me to try and relax on the sofa while she took a bath and dressed, but relaxation was impossible. I couldn't wait for the minutes to pass.

As I started to get into my dress a clock somewhere nearby boomed the hour of three in a deep, melodious, resonant tone that echoed and re-echoed long after it had finished striking. For a frac-

tion of a second it reminded me of Big Ben at Westminster, almost as if my home town were sending me a message of good wishes for the future. In a final flurry of excitement Mrs. Burney, looking a picture herself in soft brown chiffon, shepherded me downstairs and out into her smart green car.

Colonel Burney, in uniform now and very distinguished-looking, was waiting on the steps of the church and he came quickly forward and opened the door of the car. "Well . . . all present and correct," he laughed. He was helping me disentangle my wedding finery from my bouquet, and from inside the church the sound of the soft, familiar music sent a little shiver of emotion all through me. "There we are, all set." He slipped my hand through his arm, gently patting it at the same time. "Now don't be nervous, there's quite a crowd here and half the ship as far as I can see! I feel a very proud man today," and drawing himself up to his full height he led me slowly down the long aisle.

I felt as if I were floating on air, completely detached from myself, a spectator more than one of the chief participants. I was dimly aware of the sudden hush that had fallen over the congregation, of many faces turned in my direction, of the heavy perfume of flowers, of large electric fans turning slowly overhead, of a tall minister in a long white surplice at the altar rails. My heart was beating so wildly I could hardly breathe, but the sight of George half turned towards me, his strong face pale and rather grave behind his welcoming smile, helped to still the tumult in my breast. As the service progressed, ever moving in its simple solemnity, a deep and gentle sense of peace and exaltation stole over me like a benediction. I was grateful beyond words for George's quiet and unruffled poise and self-possession. At the reception which followed the wedding, at the Burneys' bungalow, he managed to relieve my sense of being a stranger amongst strangers by his easy naturalness and gaiety. With his hand firmly tucked into my arm he chatted and joked with the many people we had never seen before and would probably never see again.

It was his suggestion that we dine in the grill room overlooking the bay after our return to the hotel, rather than in our sitting room. He had sensed at once the terrific wave of shyness that had swept over me when we were alone together for the first time. He took his

cue from it immediately, and with all the art and skill that goes hand in hand with deep emotion kept closely under control, he created an atmosphere of warm and tender understanding that, to me, was quite magnificent and exactly what I needed. After dinner we wandered out onto the wide stone balcony that led off our sitting room and which faced the harbour, now a veritable fairyland of lights from the many large ships resting at anchor.

"Oh, look at that gorgeous young moon!" I exclaimed in wonder. I had never seen a moon of quite such a deep yellow color; it looked like a slightly open doorway on a dark winter's night. George had slipped his arm round me and from the garden below a heady perfume of gardenias scented the warm night air.

"That's a White Man's Moon," he said.

"A White Man's Moon? Whatever's that?"

"Our plantation people always say that cows see the new moon for the first time on its first night, the coolies see it on the second night, and the white man on the third; it's about the third night tonight."

I leaned my head on George's shoulder. "Isn't that fascinating!" I said slowly. "I think that will always be symbolical to me somehow."

"What does it make you think of, angel?" George held me closer.

"Well, it's the beginning of a new way of life sort of . . . I can't quite explain . . . the moon is just beginning a new journey and I'm starting a new life, and I see it for the first time just on white man's moon day. I . . ."

But I said no more, for George turned and gathered me in his arms, the restraint of the past weeks and hours falling from him like a cloak. "Oh, my beloved," he spoke at last and his voice was shaking with emotion, "my own darling love, it's going to be a good life, a perfect life, together now for always." My heart was beating wildly against him, I was completely swept off my feet by the breathless intensity of his embrace. I clung to him in silence, every vestige of strangeness and shyness slowly melting beneath the stream of tender, intimate words that continued to flow from his lips pressed close against my ear. I do not know how long we remained in the warm, scented darkness but over the wide expanse of water the deep, full-throated notes of the city clock echoed and re-echoed once more

as it struck the hour. When next I heard its chimes the first light of dawn was breaking over the bay and into my sleepy consciousness there slowly poured the glorious realization that I was in India, I was married, I was deliriously happy, and I had come to the satisfactory conclusion that poor Emily, after all, must have been completely out of her mind.

Chapter 7

GEORGE HAD OFTEN told me that traveling in India was dirty and uncomfortable. It was all of that and it was enchanting too! The Victoria terminus from which we had left at mid-day had all the characteristics of large stations anywhere with a lot more added. There was the same wild coming and going, hustling and bustling, the same tendency in some passengers to go suddenly a bit berserk at the sight of trains all ready to leave and rush as if possessed of the devil from one gate to another. Human beings seemed to be very much the same whatever the color of their skins. But the added differences of color and smells and noise and strange tongues held me enthralled as I gazed from the window of our compartment while George was engaged with a perspiring Cook's man a little way down the platform. There was every imaginable bright color in the varying costumes of the hurrying passengers, there was the same smell of hot fat superimposed on violent perfumes that were wafted towards me every so often. I imagined it must be hair oil of some sort for there were many sleek and shining black heads. The noise was terrific as all the passengers were talking loudly at the same time whether anyone was listening or not, and the words that poured forth in such volume sounded so peculiar that I wondered if I should ever acquire even a working knowledge of such a tongue.

The habit that appeared to be universal and which was to me quite revolting was that of a truly generous ability to expectorate. It wasn't just an ordinary expectoration undertaken with a certain amount of apology, but a reverberating, lusty, robust expectoration that came straight from the heart or even lower maybe, and landed finally with a sickening plop anywhere and on anything that might happen to be in the vicinity. The population was afflicted with a chronic, ear-splitting, easily-parted-with catarrh, and nobody seemed to think anything of it or pay any attention to it.

My eye had been caught just before we left by the hurried appearance of what looked like a lot of ghosts piling into a carriage near ours. These figures were completely covered in long flowing white robes with only a net-covered slit across the eyes. At that moment George had joined me and he explained that they were purdah women. They were never allowed to appear in public unveiled and their husbands were supposed to be the only men ever to see their faces. I couldn't help thinking that there must be many exquisitely beautiful women hidden forever from an admiring world, and yet on the other hand, it could work both ways and save an enormous amount of unkind criticism. The train itself looked to me like any other substantial transcontinental train from the outside, but it was divided up into various sections. First class, second class, intermediate, and a sort of free-for-all devoted entirely to the Indian, and I never hope to know how so many humans of varying shades of brown ever managed to pack themselves into their allotted quarters.

The first part of the journey was over the mountainous Western Ghats, rugged and stony, and gradually on to the broad sun-baked plains of central India. It was tremendously hot and a thick, yellow dust gradually covered everything. George had told me that as we got further north we should run into cool weather and that I should be glad to have a sweater and a warm coat. How glad at that moment neither of us was in a position to prophesy! A dining car was attached to the train and at certain stated stops one had to get out and walk along the platform to the car and then stay in the dining car until the next scheduled point when the same performance was repeated in reverse. One had to carry one's own bedding and mosquito net and George always traveled with a hamper containing some tinned food, a spirit stove and bottles of drinking water.

At the first stop I was intrigued by the motley crowd who joined the train. I wondered if I should ever be able to distinguish between the varying creeds and castes. George pointed out a little group of men with short black beards, wearing brightly checked cloth wound around them like a skirt; white shirts were worn over the long ankle-length skirt and round white caps were perched on the back of their heads. They were Mohammedan shopkeepers, he said, while nearby another group, who were Hindus, were clad in loincloths or dhotis

draped to look like baggy trousers; they wore short coats, and folded white turbans adorned their heads. Apparently it was from the type of headgear that one could tell at once who and what a man was as far as caste went. Strolling in a leisurely manner along the platform was an enormously fat man wearing a very thin narrow turban coiled like a snake. His dress consisted of a black three-quarter-length silk tunic buttoned down the front over a loincloth; around his neck he wore an unusually beautiful string of pearls. He was a Mawari, a moneylender and financier, one of the wealthy class of businessmen, and he certainly looked opulent to a degree in spite of his thin, rather mean-looking countenance. Women in graceful saris draped over little short jackets, their arms and ankles ajingle with bracelets, walked easily and with much elegance of bearing, carrying on their heads bundles and brass vessels, and many of them also had small children straddled across one hip, clad in nothing but a smile and a string around their waists on which was a little charm. Native vendors of brightly colored mineral waters and greasy-looking little sweetmeats bustled up and down doing a roaring trade with the occupants of the train.

On the platform itself were wells marked respectively "drinking water for Hindus," and "drinking water for Mohammedans." In a far corner of the station a squatting figure was quietly cooking food in an iron pot over a little fire. He had his back to us and George said that if a human shadow should fall across his food it would be polluted for him and he would throw it away and start all over. It was a gay, colorful, bustling scene and it seemed to me that it would take a lifetime to get anywhere near an understanding of this strange country with its dramatic contrasts of wealth and abject poverty, beauty and squalor, intangible mysticism and downright cruelty. The subject alone of creed and caste was a bewildering mixture of human entanglements; high caste and the untouchable were apparently separated by a chasm the centuries had been unable to bridge. Each stop that we made was very much a repetition of the first only there always seemed to be some added interest as far as I was concerned, and George appeared to be getting as much fun as I in explaining everything to me. At a small halt in the early evening a venerable old man with a long flowing beard was standing with a

bamboo across his shoulders, from which were suspended two round flat baskets.

"That's a snake charmer," George said. "Would you like to see him perform?" Ascertaining from the conductor who was passing that we had six minutes to wait, George signed to the old man who came over to us. Nodding quietly to George's inquiry he sat himself down on the ground and slowly produced a long reed pipe from the folds of his voluminous shirt. Then he took the lids off the baskets and pushed back some orange-colored cloth. Starting a soft and plaintive little note which he increased in intensity it was only a matter of seconds before the long writhing bodies of the cobras in the baskets began to move. Slowly they reared their heads, swaying back and forth in front of the old man. As the music increased in tone and pace they blew out their ugly hoods keeping a rhythm of their own to the sound of the pipe. Though fascinated by the sight in the soft evening twilight, I was thankful we were safely in the train, and I wasn't sorry when we slowly began to move. George tossed him some coins, which seemed to please the old man for his face was wreathed in smiles and he rose quickly and made us a deep salaam.

"Don't they ever get bitten, George?" I asked, shivering.

"Very seldom," he answered, "and I have been told that they pull the snakes' fangs or remove the poison glands. I don't know if that is so or not."

I hurriedly put the thought from me that I was heading for a place where cobras would be my daily neighbors and tigers and leopards as well. Sufficient unto the day!

As we sped past little villages every once in a while they looked rather like Christmas cards in the darkness, the small windows in the mud huts illuminated with the yellow light of oil lamps, while here and there a wood fire silhouetted the features of strange-looking groups squatting on their haunches round the blaze. George explained that 90 per cent of India's almost four hundred millions were quite illiterate and that their chief means of spreading news and information was by "gup" or gossip so I could well imagine their little gatherings round the campfire were of the greatest importance.

At intervals during the night I peeked through the shutters as

we slowed down outside one or two big cities. Squalid little collections of huts were intersected with narrow lanes; here and there were large stone houses of strange architecture surrounded by walls overgrown in many cases with heavy creepers, and belonging, I presumed, to wealthy Indians. Funny little carriages waited outside the stations. They looked like square wooden boxes on wheels and usually had two painfully thin horses harnessed to the front. It was difficult to distinguish in the lamplight half the things I wanted to see, and as George was sleeping peacefully in spite of all the clatter and noise that went on at each stop, I hadn't the heart to wake him just to satisfy my curiosity.

Towards sundown on the second day in the train, as we slowed our pace all of a sudden in a wide stretch of open country, a most frightful and penetrating stench gradually filled the compartment. Never had I smelt anything like it in my life. "What is that awful smell, George?" I asked as I quickly held my nose.

"It's something very dead," he replied as he felt for his pipe and tobacco.

"What sort of something?" A horrid little sinking feeling had taken possession of me. What could be dead and left untended like that to fill the air with its horrible reminder?

"It's most probably a cow or a buffalo somewhere round about." Gratefully I inhaled the sweet-smelling smoke. "We shall be out of it in a moment or two."

"It must have been dead a long time," I said, "it's simply foul."

"No, I don't suppose it's been dead very long, a few hours maybe. Things in this climate decompose very quickly, you know."

"A few hours!" I was astonished beyond words. To think that anything could smell like that in a few hours was almost unbelievable. "But, George, a few hours . . ." I looked at him in amazement. "Does everything do that?"

"How do you mean 'everything'?" He lit another match and puffed a little harder.

A horrible thought had suddenly taken form in my mind, something that had never even presented itself to me before. "Well, I mean . . . people . . . you know, when people die . . ." I couldn't finish the sentence.

He came across and sat down beside me. "What are you turning

over and over in that mind of yours?" He smiled as he took my hand. Always he was quick to sense anything that bothered me, that seemed to disturb my natural gaiety or upset my equanimity; it was one of his most comforting characteristics.

"Well," my thinking had been rapid during the preceding few minutes; I had to find out about this thing however much I shrank from it, "if people and things go bad so soon, don't they have to be buried quickly too?"

"Yes, they do." There was no hesitancy in the reply. My heart sank lower.

"You mean that if you die in the morning you have to be buried in the afternoon, or if you die at night you have to be buried early in the morning?"

"Yes, that's about it, darling." George was searching my face quietly. "But what is it that is worrying you? What does it matter when you are buried once you have passed on to another experience—your present 'you' does not know anything about it."

"But, George!" I clung to his hand. "So soon . . . you might not be really dead . . . you might easily be buried alive." Always I had had a fear of death and of being buried alive and never before had I ever told anybody about it. At home at least two or three days were allowed to elapse between death and burial and that, I had felt, was little enough time. The thought of a mere six or eight hours threw me into a mild state of panic. It was the most appalling prospect: you were dead, nailed up in a box and under the ground almost in a shorter time than it takes to tell. Suddenly I threw my arms around George's neck and clung to him with all my strength. "O promise me that if I should die out here you will keep me with you a little while longer, hold me in your arms like this . . . don't let them take me away too soon . . . promise me . . . don't ever let me be buried alive!" I knew that I was talking wildly, almost incoherently. The impressions and reactions of the previous three days had been so many and so varied, and this present revelation had somehow hit me on a most vulnerable spot so unexpectedly, and with such force, that my sense of proportion had temporarily deserted me.

Quick to respond, George held me close for a few seconds in silence, then gently releasing me he held my face between his hands and kissed me. "You shall never be buried alive, I promise you." His

tone was light and bantering, but there was a drawn little expression round his eyes. "Now you promise me you won't worry any more on that score. As long as I am with you, you have nothing to fear."

And all of a sudden I could have bitten my tongue out for ever having said a word about my own distress, for I remembered the bitter blow that had hit George during my second year at Downside. His parents had been critically injured in a riding accident when their frightened ponies had bolted over a steep hillside. George had been out in the jungle on a big game hunt, and by the time the runner reached his camp with a telegram and he could make the eighteen-hour trip he was too late. The funeral had been delayed as long as possible, but his train was late and he had arrived at their bungalow just as all was over. Deeply as I had grieved for him at the time in my own youthful way, I had, with the resilience of youth, forgotten all too quickly. Now I had stirred up for him memories that must hurt cruelly.

"Oh, I'm sorry, so sorry." I hid my face in his neck. "I shouldn't have said anything, I just . . ."

"I hope you will always tell me what is on your mind. I don't want you ever to keep things to yourself." Swiftly the shadow passed, and within an hour we had to transfer to another train with all the attendant commotion of a busy junction coupled with the fact that a young gang of coolies had to be closely watched while my caravan of luggage was safely transferred.

The following day as we neared Bengal province, the type of scenery changed from the dry parched plains to green and swampy country. The waterways were thick with water hyacinth and the villages were surrounded by tall palm trees and groves of bananas. Fat little naked babies played in the sunshine, and I was most interested to see a couple of scantily attired housewives sitting outside their huts one in front of the other, the one behind assiduously removing the unwelcome visitors that had evidently taken lodgment in her friend's black and well-oiled tresses! Chickens, goats, terribly thin-looking cows and more robust-looking buffaloes wandered around at will in this country where time seemed to mean very little.

On the fourth evening at dusk we had completed the third and last transshipment of ourselves and all our baggage at Amingoan on the banks of the wide Brahmaputra River. There we had to take a

little ferry steamer across the river to Pandu, where a dinky h. ³¹I train which ran on a narrow gauge single-track line the final 36 miles to the foot of the Naga hills was waiting. Numberless heads were protruding from the windows as we walked along the cinder pathway. I was becoming quite used to being stared at almost as if I was a sort of exhibit A. George had told me more than once that it was a form of politeness in the Orient, and that probably a large majority of the people hardly, if ever, saw a white woman.

Darkness had fallen when we finally pulled out of the little station, and I was so overcome with a desire just to sleep that we settled ourselves early on the hardest of little bunks that I had so far encountered. It seemed as if a glorious oblivion had only just overtaken me, though in reality I had slept three or four hours, when there was a mighty crash and I found myself face down in the middle of the floor, while suitcases and golf clubs rained down on top of me. George had entirely disappeared under the opposite bunk. For a few seconds I was too stunned to move, but I heard his muffled shouts above the incredible bedlam that had broken loose outside. "Are you all right, darling? Speak to me for God's sake." He sounded quite frantic and the next moment he was dragging me onto my feet. "Are you hurt anywhere, are you hurt?"

"I'm not hurt," I gasped weakly. "Are you all right?" Outside all hell seemed to have been unleashed. The most unearthly shrieks rent the air, which I was sure came from no human throat. "George, what is it?" Suddenly I was terrified. "What is that ghastly noise? What has happened?"

He didn't say if he was hurt or not; he just gripped my hand and felt for the light. "It sounds to me like elephants—I think we must have run into a herd on the line. Get some clothes on quickly and we'll see what has happened." His voice was calmer now but firm and determined, and as we hurried into our things the noise outside increased. Footsteps of running, shouting people passed and re-passed the carriage, and the light of oil flares cast eerie shadows across the windows. In no time at all we were stumbling hand in hand along the track to the front of the train where one of the weirdest scenes imaginable presented itself. The moonlight made everything clear and it was immediately obvious what had happened. The train had run fair and square into some elephants just as we

had rounded a bend in dense forest. They had evidently mis-timed the speed of the train in their walk across the line, and one huge elephant lay right across the tracks while a second lay half on and half off his companion. Both were obviously dead, and the front wheels of the engine were off the tracks. Our train seemed to be stalled forever in a green tunnel cut out of solid Indian forest. I shivered with horror and redoubled my hold on George's hand. He looked quickly all round and spotting a large tree stump, he led me to it.

"Sit down here, will you, for a little while. I'm going back to find the conductor and see what can be done. I'll be as quick as I can. Try not to be scared, angel," he stooped and buttoned my coat. "Nothing will come with all this din going on, and I am only too thankful we didn't turn over."

The next moment he was walking briskly down the track. I felt as if I had been turned over several hundred times and every succeeding second seemed more like an hour. Our fellow passengers could at least give vent to their feelings by yelling and shouting and rushing up and down, and a couple of young boys were already standing on top of the elephants, thoroughly enjoying themselves like boys the world over.

It was useless to pretend that I was not scared almost silly. I was. The whole thing had happened so fast and so unexpectedly that if I had been hit on the head with a brick I couldn't have felt more stunned. Though I had on a camel's-hair coat and a scarf round my head I was shivering as if possessed of the palsy. I was alone in the most wicked-looking jungle except for a throng of excited, jabbering, fear-maddened natives who were racing up and down the track in a state of complete confusion. About twenty feet away from where I was sitting the two huge elephants lay still and silent, their enormous tusks shining silver white in the bright clear moonlight. It was a macabre and sickening sight. In the dense jungle the terrified screaming of the rest of the herd added to the general pandemonium.

I had no idea who or what all these natives were, whether they were fierce or friendly, tame or wild. Little knots of the quieter ones gathered round me every few minutes staring, chattering together, speculating perhaps as to whether I should taste good fried or boiled,

I didn't know. I only knew that if George didn't come back soon I should join the band of highly overwrought, yelling Orientals myself and start running up and down the track yipping away with the best of them.

Suddenly I thought of Mother and Father and the boys and that only increased my wretchedness. How I wished at the moment that I was safely tucked up in my own bed in the heart of dear, dirty London. Oh, I wished George would come! I had no idea how long he had been gone or even where he was.

The next moment a cold clammy mass slithered gently over my instep, and I leaped to my feet with a half-smothered scream that would have matched anything I had heard so far if I had not been able somehow to muzzle it with the back of my hand. Peering at the ground I saw an enormous fat toad beside my shoe, and after a slight pause he hopped quietly onto the track and continued happily along from stone to stone towards the train, evidently athirst for information as to the strange goings-on in his jungle fastness. Thank heaven it wasn't a snake, I consoled myself. That I could not have endured. All at once from behind the mass of elephant I saw George walking towards me and he was whistling as cheerfully as if he had been strolling along Piccadilly with tickets for a hard-to-get show safely in his pocket. He was accompanied by a stout Indian official wearing his sun helmet in the moonlight and carrying an open umbrella presumably to keep the dew off.

"All's well, darling," George called to me. "We shall be moving along in a few minutes." A rather forced cheerfulness sounded in his voice, I thought, and it didn't seem possible that about two tons of elephant could be cleared from the track in a few moments. I decided quickly, however, that the best thing for me to do was to make up my mind on the spot never to be surprised again as long as I lived.

The official doffed his helmet with old-world courtliness and bowed low at the same time. "Madam," he said, and he seemed to be shaking like a jelly from fright or cold or both, "I demand pardon . . . such things as this are not possible." Privately I disagreed with him entirely: not only were such things possible, they were already accomplished.

He continued to apologize for the railway, the staff, the board

of directors, the elephants, in fact for the whole world it seemed, and would have continued if George had not gently but firmly interrupted him.

"I found out from the conductor, dear" (all very formal in public), George said, "that there is a maintenance gang stationed in tents about half a mile down the line. I walked along and woke them up, and the foreman here very kindly said we might borrow their trolleys and finish the short distance on to Lumding Junction."

"There, Madam, I am most certainly sure that you will be able to take the freight train on. Usually there are one or two coaches attached." The poor man was desperately anxious to make all possible amends for our present débacle. As he finished speaking the trolley appeared as from nowhere and with a further profuse exchange of courtesies we mounted a hard wooden seat, two natives hopped up at the back and started a lever and we were off!

George slipped his arm round my waist, spectators notwithstanding, and drew me close. "My poor thing," his voice was rueful, "were you very frightened?"

"Of course not," I lied cheerfully, not that I really expected he would believe me, but this was only the beginning, I told myself, and I might just as well make as good a showing as possible. Now that he was safely beside me once again, my usual capacity to bounce back was slowly asserting itself. "I'm glad, though, we didn't have to spend the night here, it reminds me of the sort of things I used to see in my dreams when I'd been eating too much cheese."

George threw back his head and roared with laughter. "It is dense here, and it always looks weird at night, but in the daytime you'll see how beautiful it is." Dense wasn't the word and I hoped sincerely I should share his opinion. Gigantic trees laced together with mammoth undergrowth of some sort reared their stately forms way up into the darkness. Every available space was filled with huge leaves and branches that formed themselves into shapes so grotesque I kept my eyes on my lap most of the time.

"How far is it to Lumding?" The wind was whooshing in my ears and my scarf had long since slipped around the back of my neck.

"Only about three miles. As soon as we get into the train I shall heat you up a tin of soup."

A tin of soup! That sounded to me like water in the desert. But

where was the soup and where the stove, in fact, where was anything? I had completely forgotten all about our luggage.

"What about all our suitcases and everything? I've just never given it a thought," I laughed, and my laugh suddenly turned into what sounded like a loud and penetrating hiccough as the trolley hit a stone on the center of the track and almost threw us flat on our faces.

"Asti, asti,"* George called over his shoulder, which strange command caused an immediate slow-down, for like a horse returning to its stable we had been gathering speed as we neared our objective. "There's another trolley coming on behind, darling, with our suitcases and bedding and the food and water box. That's partly what took me such an age, sorting things out. The heavy stuff will come along all right once the train is back on the rails."

"Oh, you always did think of everything," I said, snuggling closer. "I do love you so much," and the very next moment we rounded a bend in the line and caught the full glare of at least half a dozen lights signifying our safe arrival at the junction.

Fortunately there were some coaches attached to the freight train and in a remarkably short space of time we were once more en route full of hot tomato soup and a great deal of gratitude that things had turned out so well. I shuddered as I thought of all that we had escaped. George had sent a telegram back to Pandu with full details and asked that immediate assistance be sent to the scene of the mishap; and all that remained for us to do was to curl ourselves up for what was left of the night, with the sincere hope, on my part anyhow, that the last lap of the journey home might be free of any further such experiences.

* Slowly

Chapter 8

GEORGE HAD often described to us the beauty of his surroundings in Assam, but he was a master-hand at understatement. I might have known that I should be totally unprepared for the glorious panorama that met my eyes when we finally got out of the train at the little wayside station the following afternoon. Away to the left as far as the eye could see stretched the wondrous Himalaya Mountains, their snow peaks a veritable blaze of glory in the clear sunshine. To the right range after range of green mountains folded one into the other, a mass of lights and shades on their wooded slopes. While George was seeing about the luggage I stood beside the track and feasted my eyes on the beauty all around me.

In the foreground the jungle had, for a time anyhow, given place to a wide expanse of rice fields, dotted here and there with graceful clumps of tall bamboos. The air was crisp and cool, and the blueness of the sky coupled with the snow mountains reminded me very much of Switzerland on a much grander scale.

The buggy was waiting just behind the station. We had seven miles to drive to the river along the open rice fields. Every so often we passed neatly thatched mud houses surrounded by bamboo fences, and word must have spread amongst the villagers of the impending arrival of George's bride, for little knots of natives had gathered beside the road as we passed, smiling and bowing and acting as if they were tremendously interested. A flight of bright green parrots whirled across the road and disappeared as quickly into a large bamboo grove. George pointed out a big cormorant standing on one leg in the rice fields, and a little beyond him a small boy in a huge circular straw hat was taking a leisurely ride on the back of a large buffalo.

"Aren't you glad to have your coat?" George smiled down at me. He had changed from tropical suits into grey flannel trousers and a

tweed sports coat. "From now on for the next four months or more we have such a grand cold season."

The narrow road branched off suddenly to the left, down a grassy trail through thick jungle for another mile, until we came to a clearing about twenty yards square on which was built a small thatched hut. At the sound of the horse's hoofs pounding along, three tall natives, naked to the waist except for rather voluminous loincloths, came quickly out of the hut. Each had a long pole in his hands and, their faces wreathed in smiles, they entered into a vivacious, and to me unintelligible conversation with George.

Our driver had hitched the pony to a tree and was busy carrying the suitcases with the help of the boatmen down a little path which led to the river. George went first and I followed. It was just a matter of about ten yards to where the wide sweep of the deep green water came into view. The boat was usually referred to as a dugout and was simply a conveyance, rather on the order of a canoe, formed from the trunk of some massive tree. Small seats with cushions and adjustable backs were placed facing each other fore and aft. Two men poled in front and the one at the back was the steerer.

A certain amount of finesse was required in reaching the seats. The dugout was a wobbly kind of craft, and taking even a little too much liberty with the space either at the right or the left of the boat was likely to tip one directly into the water. Once settled, however, we glided smoothly into midstream and I took a deep breath of the cool fresh air and relaxed comfortably against the cushions.

"You must be dog-tired," George said. "It won't be long now before we are at the bungalow."

"I'm not so much tired as overwhelmed," I laughed. "How utterly beautiful this is."

The jungle was quite dense on either bank of the river. It looked just as thick as it had during the night but in the daylight it was possible to take in the details, and the picture had lost much of its terrifying outline in the soft afternoon sunlight. Giant trees stretched their huge branches a hundred feet into the air. Graceful bamboos soft and feathery as an ostrich plume were skirted with myriads of different kinds of ferns woven and interwoven like the pattern on a fine lace, and every here and there exquisite orchids cascaded down the trunks of the trees to which their roots were attached.

"Oh, *do* look at those monkeys!" I cried excitedly. "Look at them . . . swinging from branch to branch like that, and look, some of them have got babies hanging round their necks! What a wonderful way to travel with a family!"

The monkeys broke into the rudest kind of noises as we passed and the boatmen seemed to be thoroughly enjoying my evident excitement. As we passed a log in the water several small turtles fell with a plop into the river. In the jungle a beautiful sound echoed through the trees. It was as if somebody were striking a piece of metal. George said it was a bird, aptly named the coppersmith bird.

We had three miles to go up the river, but it seemed only a few minutes to me till George pointed to some approaching small rapids and said that round the next bend after the rapids we should see the bungalow. A thrill ran through me at the thought of really seeing my future home at last, and when we finally rounded the curve I almost tipped the boat over in my anxiety to get my first glimpse.

As long as I live I shall always remember my delight as my eyes fell on the large thatched-roof white house gently timbered with brown. Smoke was curling lazily from the chimney and a huge mass of flaming purple bougainvillea lay like a wide sash across one end of the bungalow. It stood high up on a hill and soft green lawns sloped gently down to a white fence that ran all round. Dense jungle lay at the back and at one side, but we had returned to the glorious mountains again at the bend of the river, and the bungalow faced them. We had seen photos of the place at home, but no photo could do justice to such a picturesque house in such a magnificent setting.

"Welcome home, darling," I heard George saying, for we had already tied up at the little landing station while I had been lost in admiration, and he was standing on the bank holding out his hand to me.

"Why, it's simply lovely, George! The bungalow reminds me of an English country house."

"It's a bit of a pull up the hill," he replied. "One of these days I'm going to make an easier approach." A narrow path wound round the hill and by the time we reached the top I was quite breathless with exertion and excitement. George's two spaniels literally hurled themselves at us as we opened the gate, and the bungalow

servants were gathered in a smiling group at the foot of the verandah steps. They had decorated the rooms with masses of orchids and jungle ferns, and a bright wood fire was burning in the huge living room.

"Come and see your dressing room." George slipped his hand through my arm. "I've had it specially fixed for you." He led me through a large bedroom to where a curtain divided it from a smaller room, one half of which had a wide bay window looking right onto the mountains. He could hardly conceal the pride with which he showed me the long wardrobes that he had had built against the walls. A little writing desk was beneath the windows, and a dressing table complete with silver brushes and mirror stood in the opposite corner.

All of a sudden I was on the verge of tears, big, fat, scalding tears, which I was determined were not going to fall on this first evening together in our own home.

"I don't know what you'll do when your lovely tidy bungalow is all cluttered up with everything I've brought." I laughed a little unsteadily, but at least the tears had been fought back, however much of an emotional crisis threatened to engulf me.

"Do you know what I am going to do?" His arms were round me, his lips on my forehead. "I'm going to really live now for the first time in my life."

Chapter 9

I WAS AWAKENED that first morning by the tinkling of Nero's silver anklets as she pattered along the verandah and knocked sharply on our door, waiting for George's sleepy permission to enter. The spaniels rushed past her and, as she carried in the early morning tea tray, leapt joyfully onto my bed. I had the feeling that master had not encouraged such familiarity but that they were taking a chance with me. Nero put the tray quietly down on the bedside table and slipped out of the room.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," George gently prodded me, "or you won't be able to see the sun rise."

"What time is it?" I stretched luxuriously. "These beds are simply heavenly."

"It's six-thirty almost," he answered as he poured the tea. "Push those dogs off and make room for me."

"What an hour to get up!" I laughed, ignoring the command about the dogs and making room for him on the other side.

"Are you rested?" The grey eyes searched my face as he handed me my cup.

"I certainly am," I answered. "I just can't wait to see all there is to see."

Fifteen minutes later we stood on the verandah hand in hand, watching the most breathtaking scene in the world. The sunrise came suddenly. A great ball of fire seemed to burst into a golden shower over the Himalaya Mountains in the far distance, lighting the sky with salmon pinks and green-blues, diffusing the world before us with light. We were like a pair of eagles standing on the heights of our lofty hillside. Around us as far as the eye could see stretched mile after mile of dense green jungle faintly tipped with the gold of the fast-rising sun. To the west were the rounded masses of the wild Naga Mountains burnt-orange in the new daylight. Below, the river stretched like a broad silver ribbon between the

feathery ferns and soft green bamboos that lined its banks. Brilliant birds darted in and out of the lower reaches by the water and the restless monkeys swung from the higher branches chattering and screeching in the first game of the day. I inhaled deeply. The air was crisp and sparkling, perfumed with the smell of jasmine and roses and the sweet odor of wood smoke from fires somewhere nearby. Figures were stirring in and out of the buildings faintly shrouded in mist at the foot of the hill. The sound of a sudden shout and the barking of a dog in the distance carried across the stillness.

"Well, darling, this is our home." George slipped his arm round my waist. "Will you like it?"

"Oh, I *do*, George! I think it is perfectly beautiful, it is much more glorious than I have ever been able to visualize."

We ate our breakfast before the large wood fire in the living room.

"I'm afraid it is back to work for me now," he said as we finished our meal. "I hate to leave you, but I will try not to be out too long today." I must have looked startled, for George said matter-of-factly, "You'll be busy unpacking, won't you?"

"I imagine I shall." My gaze took in the enormous array of cases and boxes that were stacked everywhere within sight.

"I'll send one of the carpenters up from the factory to open lids for you." Together we walked out onto the verandah and George picked up his topee.

As I watched him stride down the path, the dogs at his heels, I wanted to call out to him to stop, to take me with him or stay at home. A sudden realization that I was going to be alone for the first time in my strange surroundings swept over me and I had to restrain the words that rushed to my lips. I leant against the verandah railing and tried to still my beating heart. I had to get used to being alone, I told myself firmly. My battles in future against unfamiliar surroundings, loneliness, snakes, mosquitoes, wild animals, a foreign tongue and a regiment of servants had to be faced largely on my own. I might as well begin right away. The gentle buzz of the servants' chatter on the back verandah comforted me somewhat. They were living human beings and George had assured me I need have no fear of them.

The bungalow was really charming. Its thatched roof was about three feet thick, to keep the house cool in the hot weather and warm

in the cold weather. It was raised off the ground on brick pillars about ten feet, allowing a current of air to circulate freely all the time.

The wide verandah ran all around the house and led into all the rooms. The large living room was in the center, with big bay windows and French doors; the dining room led off this room at the back, and next to it was a small room that George used as his office. On each side was a bedroom wing with dressing rooms and bathrooms for each. Underneath the bungalow were storerooms or godowns, in which were kept groceries, lamps, oil and food in sacks for the ponies, cows and chickens.

The furniture for the verandah and bedrooms was made of cane, woven by the prisoners in jail at Gauhati. Most of the other things had come from one of the big stores in Calcutta, but the Jacobean dining-room chairs, sideboard and table George had had especially made for my arrival. He had taken advantage of the fact that the Chinese carpenters on the plantation were clever at copying almost anything from a picture.

I decided to start immediately on the formidable task of unpacking and for several mornings it occupied many hours. Trunks and suitcases I tackled first. Mother had packed everything so beautifully with her own hands that I had not known, till I proceeded to empty the contents, all she had stowed away so miraculously. My heart contracted painfully as I undid the trunk containing evening gowns and shoes according to the list tacked under the lid. There was a filmy white chiffon with pink roses at the waist; a soft black lace with diamante clips at the low-cut neck; a pale yellow taffeta with a little gold metallic bolero coat; a soft green chiffon frilled from waist to hem with narrow velvet loops that matched perfectly, cascading down the side like a woodland waterfall. There were others that melted my feminine heart and made me long for somebody to be with me to share their beauty. And as for the shoes! Mother had indeed pandered to my lifelong vanity with a vengeance, for there were shoes of every hue and color, matching, contrasting, and just plain.

Suddenly as I sat there on the floor beside the trunk, my lap full of treasures, two large fat tears sprang unbidden to my eyes and rolled gently down my cheeks. Where and when was I ever going

to wear this heavenly trousseau? Nellie Burney, who had helped Mother with my clothes, must have thought the jungle provided a social life that matched her gay whirl in Bombay and Simla and other civilized places where she had always lived. We had almost no neighbors. George had pointed out to me from the verandah the topography of the surrounding neighborhood. Ten miles up the river was a plantation where a man called Carstairs lived; three miles down the river and then seven miles back by road lay the plantation where the Turners held an open-house tennis afternoon every three weeks for the little group of white people who lived scattered around them at varying distances of from two to thirty miles. Our social life would be extremely simple if not almost non-existent judged by normal standards. My eyes fell on the array of shoes all round me. In their dainty charm they were the biggest blow of all, for George had produced the very first evening a pair of hideous long white canvas mosquito-boots that reached to the knees, which he insisted most emphatically I had to put on at dusk every evening without fail.

"Do you mean I've always got to wear these horrible things every night in life?" I had asked in horror.

"Yes, darling," George said firmly. "I want you to promise me you will, because malaria is a curse here and mosquitoes love to bite the small veins around the ankles most particularly. It is an absolute 'must' that you do as I ask, and I shall see that you do, too," he had grinned. A masterful note in his voice accompanied the last sentence in this odious speech, and unwillingly and with inner rebellion I had dragged on the hideous things. And now here I was, surrounded by the most tempting array of shoes any woman could hope to possess. Viciously I blew my nose and wiped my face. Surely I should be able to wear them sometime, I consoled myself. Only the night before George had talked of our going to another district about forty miles away as soon as he could take time off again, to spend a weekend with Ted Champion. Perhaps there weren't any mosquitoes forty miles away, I reasoned, and my spirits mounted once more. I wanted to meet Ted Champion too. He was George's closest friend and a doctor in charge of a large group of plantations. George had met him on the ship when he first returned to Assam and they had become fast friends. Father had been so interested in

all George told him about a doctor's life in the jungle. We all felt we really knew him quite well, we had heard so much about him. Perhaps he might be able to think of some way around wearing these ugly boots, I told myself hopefully, as I stowed away into the capacious closets the contents of some of the other forty-six cases.

One small suitcase dating back to Downside days contained a miscellaneous collection of school diplomas, china animals, old dance programmes, faded corsages, my dog-eared leather copy of Rudyard Kipling's "If." How far away it all seemed now, I smiled to myself, though a horrible wave of nostalgia gripped me by the throat as I tumbled the contents of the case into a drawer. George came in for lunch at twelve o'clock, and I shall always remember the first morning he returned. I heard his whistle as he came round the bungalow and rushed to meet him. Goonja, the second houseboy, was evidently waiting for him to sit down in a chair, for he stood beside it with a tray on which was a box of matches and a bottle of iodine. As George sat down, his boots caked with mud, Goonja handed him the tray.

"What on earth are you going to do?" I asked in amazement.

George laughed. "You are certainly completing your education, aren't you," he said.

The boy took off George's mud-caked boots, while George lit a match.

"Come over and see the leeches," he said. "There are always some on my ankles when I have been walking through the jungle."

I watched as he rolled off his socks and applied a hot match to the rear end of the revolting black bodies that clung to his ankles, gorged with his blood. Immediately they released their fangs and fell to the floor, where the boy promptly trod on them one by one.

I shuddered. "I shall never dare walk outside."

"They are usually non-poisonous," George said calmly, as he anointed the bleeding spots with iodine. "It looks much worse than it is, and before long you'll be doing this yourself."

"I'm quite sure I shan't," I answered heartily. "I had no idea there were such things."

But this was a trifle compared with a great number of other things I was to discover in the ensuing weeks and months. One was that George worked from sunrise to sunset, and that as well as being

responsible for the working of the 900-acre plantation and all the people on it, he not only had to be boss but judge, jury, counsellor, maker and unmaker of marriages, and friend all rolled into one. After he had finished a long conversation with Goonja in which the boy evidently was telling George of some deeply felt wrong, I accompanied George into the bedroom while he changed for lunch.

"I simply must learn this language as soon as possible," I said. "I just can't bear not to be able to understand a word of what is going on around me, or to be able to say anything either."

"We'll start you on a lesson in the evenings after dinner just as soon as you have got yourself straightened out a little," George suggested. "As a matter of fact it is very important that you do learn the language. Many women won't bother and therefore are always at the mercy of their servants."

By the end of another week my course of instruction had started in earnest. George pulled the bridge table up in front of the fire and with a careful look to see that I was wearing my boots, he produced pencil and paper and the class was open.

As I looked across at him, the lamplight streaming down on his fair hair as he quietly and methodically wrote the words and short sentences which would help to smooth the domestic path for his young bride, the years seemed to roll back for a space. I was once more the little girl with her Prince Charming in the rambling old recreation room at home which he had converted time and time again into a veritable fairyland of romance with his tales and drawings of a land beyond the seas. I lived again for a few brief moments the magic enchantment of the small Princess lost in rapturous contemplation of four silver bracelets gleaming softly on her wrists as she slowly moved them this way and that in unalloyed delight. Just four narrow silver circles that were, unknown to all at the time, the living symbol, in their exquisitely carved completeness, of a love that would know no ending. A burning ember from the fire fell gently onto the hearth, breaking my tender reverie.

". . . and really, darling, it isn't at all difficult," George was smiling across at me, "now you say these words after me." Could it really be me here beside him now and for always, I asked myself, here at last, alone on our hilltop in the deep, impenetrable, silent jungle? Flowing over with peace and happiness I repeated the strange-sound-

ing words one by one. If I needed anything to give me a sense of reality it was supplied by the warmth and scratchiness of my long mosquito boots. "These things are going to rival the diabolical serge bloomers of Downside days," I smiled to myself. I wondered if I could ever get used to their constricting discomfort, and I thought with a slight pang of the many pairs of dainty shoes and sandals that Nero had laid so neatly on the top shelf of my clothes closet.

"I'll just have to wear the evening shoes in the daytime," I smiled to myself quietly. "I shall be all alone for hours and hours and I can wear the pink satin ones one day and the green another, different ones every day of the week." And I had lots of daytime shoes as well which were lovely and elegant. I could fill in by wearing those in the early mornings and late afternoons when George was around.

When the lesson was over and we had lingered on a while in front of the fire he would pick me up and carry me to our room as he had carried me many dozens of times in the years gone by to my own small bed in the nursery. Often long after he was finally asleep I would lie wide-eyed in the darkness just listening, for what, I did not know.

The denseness of the jungle was strangely oppressive, but I don't know which was worse in those first days—the silence of the day or the noises of the night. The jungle animals, who slept all day, awoke at night and came forth from their lairs with many a terrifying grunt or roar.

I lay in my bed, my heart thumping, waiting for the sound of footpads in the garden, until I fell asleep at last. Then one night they did come, I was sure of it. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I awakened George and told him an animal was prowling outside.

"It's probably only a cow," he answered sleepily. There was a certain calm aloofness in his tone which I supposed to be born of his long acquaintance with anything that wore a fur coat or slithered along the ground. "I'll get up and have a look out of the window with the flashlight." A few seconds later he called softly to me in the darkness. "Come and see . . . quickly . . . it's a magnificent sight."

Little thinking that I was going to look straight into the deep orange eyes of an enormous leopard, I padded over to the window and peered through the screen. "Oh, murder!" I yelled at the top of my voice. "Whatever shall we do?"

George threw back his head and roared with laughter. "Don't be scared, there's nothing to mind really . . . he is simply out on a midnight prow. Don't you think he is a superb sight?"

Words failed me completely, but I had to admit to myself that the muscular creature with the silky spotted coat who was blinking placidly at us in the light of the torch was certainly an awesome sight.

"He will be twenty miles away by morning, darling—he wouldn't come into the bungalow," George said complacently as we returned to bed.

"Oh, move over and take me in," I answered stupidly. "If I ever live to see another birthday I shall be pleasantly surprised."

"You used to love to hear all about these things years ago," he teased, as he held me close, "and you'll soon get to realize that there is really nothing to fear."

But I *was* afraid and I was furious with myself for it. I seemed to fear so many things all at once. Most of all perhaps I feared myself. I just did not know if I was ever going to be able to fit into this strange new life. I was faced with a gigantic problem that involved not only my own happiness but George's as well.

I was utterly perplexed . . . and terribly in love, and when one loves from the heart, there appears to be an indefinable line drawn between the joys that go with it and the quiet suffering which is an almost inevitable part of love the whole world over.

Chapter 10

HOUSEKEEPING, in any language, is to my mind something of a marvel. Women are supposed to know how to "keep house" just because they are women. Mother's household had always seemed to run on oiled wheels, the house was immaculate, the meals perfect, with absolutely no effort on her part. For me things were entirely different.

I had a large staff of servants bound by religious and caste distinctions which demanded that each do only his own type of work. Facilities of all kinds were of the most primitive order, and worse than anything, I could not understand a word of what was said to me nor make any suitable reply. It was all most confusing! Moreover they all looked alike at first, though George would have known them all, blindfold.

Abdul, I knew, was the butler and the boss, and Goonja was his second in command. Nero, the ayah, was my own personal maid. But there appeared to be a regiment of "wallahs," who gradually sorted themselves in my understanding as two water carriers, a sweeper, three malis or gardeners, a cowherd, a syce or groom, a polish-wallah, a dhobi or washerman, a mail-runner, a day and a night chowkidar or janitor, and last but not least, the cook who was a personage of distinction and who ruled the kitchen which lay about a hundred yards or so behind the bungalow in a little building of its own. The servants lived in their small thatched houses, also behind the bungalow and a little further removed than the kitchen or cook-house. Some of the servants were Hindus and some Moslems and I was terribly afraid of getting them mixed up and hurting their feelings. I knew, for instance, that the very mention of pork to the cook might cause him to fall in a heap on the floor, while if anyone so much as laid a hand on one of the Hindu servants' cows there might be a riot.

At first George accompanied me on the morning round and gave the orders.

"What is a wallah?" I asked with interest for I heard Abdul continually calling a "pani-wallah" or the "jaru-wallah."

"Well," he explained, "a wallah is really one who does some particular job. For instance, the word 'pani' means water, so the pani-wallahs are the ones who carry water and generally help the cook and clean the bathtubs and so on. Jaru is the word for brush or broom, so the jaru-wallah is the sweeper, one of the lowest in caste, and he sweeps, cleans the shoes, washes the dogs, and takes care of the plumbing facilities. Do you get what I mean?"

"That makes some of it clearer, anyhow," I agreed.

Abdul was busy boiling milk and water on an oil stove on the back verandah while George and I were standing by the storeroom or godown door. The cook was extracting the necessary supplies of sugar, butter, flour, etc., for the day's menus. Every morning he brought up the freshly killed chickens for inspection and suggested the meals for the ensuing twenty-four hours.

"You'll have to watch him closely," George announced, "he is a shark on butter and sugar particularly. Don't let him take all he says he wants." I wasn't too sure that I knew where the line should be drawn myself; I wished I'd found out more about cooking before I'd left home.

"Where does he get chickens and eggs and things?" I asked.

"He goes down the river every Sunday morning to a small bazaar and buys live chickens, ducks, fish, pigeons, eggs, potatoes, onions and spices." George was reaching up to hand a can of fruit from the shelf. "Then all the groceries have to come almost seven hundred miles from Calcutta. Don't you remember my telling you? I send an order once a month and then about six weeks later the things arrive."

We had no ice or any sort of refrigeration so that the chickens, fish and all fresh food had to be eaten shortly after its preparation. I had been astonished at the excellent meals the cook turned out; he was particularly good at pastry and desserts.

"Always see that the milk and water are really boiling." George locked the storeroom door. "One has to be specially careful about that on account of typhoid and dysentery."

Oil was next given out for the lamps from the lamp room, and George warned me that oil also was an irresistible article and likely to disappear like magic. The dirty dusters were handed in to be locked up as apparently they also disappeared with amazing rapidity. And then we walked over to the cook-house.

"It's as well to have a look at the saucepans and things every morning," George suited words to the deed and picked up a couple of pans for inspection.

"I can't think how he cooks at all on that thing," I pointed to a large, round, stone affair that had iron plates on the top, an extraordinary-looking oven built into the side and a glowing fire underneath.

"They are really very ingenious," George said, peering into a meat safe in which the cook kept his treasures. Evidently clean papers were required, for the cook started to remove those that were there after George had said something, and I had to agree with George. "Never give away any of my old socks," he grinned at me, "they are prone to use them for straining the soup."

"Oh, George, don't," I shuddered.

"That's right, and you know those little oval-shaped chicken and egg croquettes you have taken such a fancy to—they can only get that particular shape to them by moulding them under their arms." He was shaking with laughter.

"I just don't believe you," I walked out of the kitchen, "and I'm sure I shall never be able to eat anything again if you don't shut up."

"Well, what the eye doesn't see, you know." He was having the best time and I had to laugh with him.

Behind the kitchen two large oil drums full of water stood over a charcoal fire for supplying the bath water. All water was carried in from a well near the kitchen. Crossing the path back to the bungalow, we saw sudden clouds of smoke pouring from all the windows.

"George!" I cried in alarm, clutching his arm and hurrying forward.

"They are just smoking out the mosquitoes that may have lodged during the night," George explained. There Abdul stood, while Goonja carried round a shovel of hot embers on which he sprinkled resin. This sent up clouds of sweet-smelling smoke, and all curtains

and cushions were well shaken and furniture moved from corners. The polish boy was busy with a tin of wax and some cloths, shining the floors; he also had to clean all windows and polish brass. I was sorry for the sweeper. He seemed to have the most discouraging job of the lot. In the bathrooms were wooden commodes with enameled pans inside. He was supposed to be possessed of a certain sixth sense which would enable him to know when it was necessary for him to approach the back door leading into the bathroom. He then removed the enamel pans, slipped them neatly into a small basket complete with lid and handle, and continued on his way into the nearest jungle where a deep pit was dug to receive his contributions. Usually he visited the bathrooms as a routine measure three times a day, but if anyone was unlucky enough to be inwardly disturbed, he was a busy man. He was a small, bandy-legged creature and, strangely enough, always smiling. I once gave away some of George's old clothes, including a full-dress tail coat which his father had handed on to him and which he never wore. I told Abdul to divide the things among the servants and the sweeper evidently won the evening tails. My whole day was made joyous by the sight of the cheerful little man departing to the jungle with his basket, the tails dragging along the ground behind him.

It made me quite unhappy to think that he was a member of that caste known as an "untouchable." He lived with the two hospital sweepers and the line sweepers, all of whom had their houses apart from everyone else. George had explained to me that that caste were scorned, looked down on by every other caste and given any job to do that was considered unclean. Nobody but a sweeper would clean shoes or touch the animals' feeding bowls or bathe a dog. George said that this untouchable caste had existed all through the centuries of Indian history and that there was no reliable authority as to exactly how they had come into existence. In some accounts of the wars of hundreds of years ago in India stress had been always laid on the fact that to this lowest caste fell the duty of handling dead and "untouchable" things. The carcasses of animals used for making leather had apparently always had in the first place to be cleaned and handled by the Untouchables, and one of the greatest insults one Oriental in India could do to another was to touch him with a shoe or throw a shoe at him. It seemed to me to be a dreadful situation

for any human being to be in and there was nothing that could be done about it. The thought of our cheerful little sweeper's unenviable status made me dislike the plumbing arrangements even more intensely. I would have used the small thatched outhouse that George patronised every morning on his way to the office if I had not been so scared of the snakes. He had told me, when I questioned him as to the clouds of smoke that I had noticed pouring from the roof of the outhouse during his visits, that it was necessary to light paper and cast it into the depths before taking a seat, as it was not unknown for a cobra to be taking a nap curled around underneath the board that formed part of the seating arrangements.

George had inherited two fat cows who supplied us with milk. The cowherd was a Nepali from the snowy heights of Darjeeling. He had an attractive little wife called Miri who wore voluminous skirts and a tiny, tight-fitting bodice which left her midriff bare. Round her neck she wore a long silver chain and ropes of colored beads. She seemed little more than a child to me as she ran singing and laughing up and down the hillside. In her spare time she would bring her knitting out into the sunshine. The wool was of rainbow colors with which she fashioned socks for her lord and master. He was the only one who wore socks and stockings and I'm sure they made him feel quite superior.

It did not take me long to learn the daily routine, nor did it take me long to discover that George's bachelor inspections needed a little alteration. For instance, it was too bad that I happened to discover that the sweeper collected his little pile of dust in one corner of the room while sweeping, and then with one deft movement lifted the corner of the rug and shot the results of his labor underneath it till another day. Goonja's method of darning socks had been to take a pale blue or green thread and run it round the hole, gathering the thread up into a small bunch and calling it a day. Any hole, too, appearing in a tablecloth, for instance, had only a piece of white stationery slipped underneath at meal times. George had said that they were ingenious. The slight fear of these people that plagued me at first gradually yielded. I grew to admire their wholehearted devotion to their "family," and with the passing of the years a genuine love and affection developed between us which is one of my most cherished memories.

Chapter 11

I COULDN'T WAIT to go down into the plantation and see for myself the fascinating business of tea-plucking of which I had heard so much, and to get a look at the people whom I had seen so far only from the top of our hill. George had told me that the season was a good one that year I came to Dingajan. I knew that the tea grew and was plucked only during the long hot weather months from March onwards and that the cold weather from December to March was given over to pruning, spraying, and hoeing. George had told me about it innumerable times, but now here I was, actually able to see everything for myself, and at last George was taking me down. It was almost the end of November but as we turned our horses along the grassy fern-banked road that led out into the plantation, George remarked that it seemed as if the plucking season was going to continue well on into December.

In a short canter we turned a slight bend in the path and the plantation suddenly came into view. Involuntarily I drew a deep breath and reined my horse. A huge expanse of soft rolling green like an immense carpet stretched into the distance as far as the eye could see. On either hand whichever way one looked the same lovely green expanse stretched to the jungle edge. Tall trees interspersed the acres of short green bushes and in the far distance the Himalaya snows in all their glory were visible against the bright blue sky. I was spellbound.

"There is a lot more of it you can't see," George said. "Let's ride on a bit. You get an even better view where the people are plucking today."

My eye suddenly fell on a large group of people in the near distance, scattered in and out among the bushes. A gay, chattering throng that looked like a flock of brightly colored birds, their nimble fingers moving with the most amazing rapidity over the tops of the bushes. Men and women were plucking together, laughing and chattering.

"Would you like to walk through the tea with me?" George asked, "while I talk to the overseer and have a look at the work?"

Dismounting, we left the horses to graze while we took a narrow footpath into the tea. Momentarily all activity ceased as we approached the workers. A tall thin man wearing a khaki coat over his baggy loincloth came forward from the group and salaamed respectfully to me and then to George. A brief conversation followed as George quickly ran his eye over the area that was being plucked. Slowly we moved in and out among the people. George knew them all by name and spoke with first one and then another, slipping his hand into the baskets and carefully examining the tender green leaves. Gradually I was to learn just exactly how important the quality of plucking was to the finished product. Here, however, was a George I had never seen before, the master on his beloved plantation among his own workers, and there was about him an air of quiet strength and authority coupled with an obvious knowledge of his job that made me swell with pride. He was held in affectionate regard by the people who joked and laughed with him as he examined the baskets. All round me an excited buzz of conversation was going on and I was certainly the center of attraction. Probably many of them had never seen a white mem-sahib before. The motley crowd overflowed with friendly interest in me, even as I in them. I was fascinated by the little red, blue and yellow silk coatees that many of the women wore beneath their gracefully draped saris, the clusters of colored glass bracelets on their wrists and fine gold rings through one nostril. Their well oiled hair shone like ebony in the sunlight and here and there a young girl had a scarlet hibiscus tucked behind her ear. Men and boys were mostly naked to the waist, wearing only the loincloth; quite a number of them seemed to favor a choker necklace of scarlet beads and gold earrings. Nearly all were slight of build and very dark of skin with snubby, rather broad noses and the deep red of the chewed betelnut juice oozing from their lips. It was an enchanting picture of intense activity in the most peaceful and beautiful of surroundings, with the tall broad-shouldered figure in the trim khaki riding clothes strolling towards me and holding out his hand on the palm of which was a small shoot of green leaf.

"You shall just have one lesson today," he grinned, as I took the

leaf from him and examined it. "You see the two small leaves joined together with a tiny shoot of a leaf coming through at the top?" I nodded. "Well, that is what we call 'Two and a Bud'; it is the two little top leaves from each shoot on the bush, and it is these leaves from which we get the finest infusion of tea when it is manufactured. The planter's dream is always to pluck just 'two and a bud' and so make the very best teas on the market.

"Why, that's rather a lovely name for it." I tucked the small shoot into my pocket. "I wonder if I shall ever be able to understand all about your work."

"Of course you will, in time." George smiled. "It took me quite a while myself, remember," he teased. As we threaded our way back again towards the horses a buzz of excited chatter broke out all round us.

"Oh, look at those babies!" Quickly I was on to the next point of interest in this all too interesting journey of discovery. We had turned down a road to the right to where another little group were plucking in another section. At the side of the road a row of adorable fat naked babies were lying on the grass under umbrellas. They appeared to be in the charge of slightly larger babies around the age of two or three. "Can I pick one up for a moment?" I asked as we stopped beside a particularly luscious specimen who was sucking a piece of none-too-clean-looking banana.

"No, no, you mustn't touch them." George stopped me quickly. "The mothers are very superstitious. If you touched one and anything were to go wrong with it after, the mother might think you had put the evil-eye on it."

"Oh, George," I was utterly disgusted, "as if I could—or would."

"I know, darling. It sounds ridiculous to us but it is very real to them. You must never admire a baby either, in so many words, that's unlucky. But if you say 'what an ugly little brat you've got there' the mother will beam with pleasure . . . she knows what you mean and no harm is done."

"Oh, dear," I sighed, "shall I ever learn all this? Do the babies lie there all day?"

"No," George stopped and dismounted again, "the mothers come and feed them every now and again and sometimes tie them onto their backs and take them with them while they continue plucking."

"But the snakes, George"—suddenly I shivered—"aren't they liable to get bitten on the ground like that?"

"It's very unlikely," he answered, looking at his watch. "Snakes won't often come into the open like this nor near anything that waves its limbs so constantly as a baby does. Would you like to stay and watch the babies a moment or two while I just have a look at the leaf in this number?"

"I certainly would," I replied. "I wish I had brought my camera."

"That's taboo as well," George cautioned. "They consider that almost as unlucky if not more so than anything else."

A small group of women were at that minute filing out of the tea, their full baskets on their heads, and I was struck with the easy grace with which they moved and their wonderfully upright carriage. I knew it must be nearly midday for George had said all the workers would carry their leaf to the factory at that time to have it weighed. This was done again in the afternoon, after the baskets had been filled once more, and the amount plucked noted down against each name so that accurate payment would be made at the weekly pay day.

"It's so strange to see all this in actual fact," I said. "As far back as I can remember you used to tell me about it, but it's never quite the same when you just picture it in your mind."

"And I have often wondered if I should ever have you with me to see it," he smiled quietly, "and now you are here, thank goodness, and the sun is getting a bit hot. Will you be a good girl and ride home? I have to go to the far end of the plantation and meet with David for a while."

"But I want to see the tea being made in the factory and all that—I want to see everything," I answered without trying to conceal my disappointment.

"All in good time," George laughed. "We'll find a few moments to go into the factory later this afternoon, and remember David is coming over to dinner this evening. It's time you two got to know each other." I could see that he was eager to be on his way and that I must curb my desire for further enlightenment until the afternoon.

I had forgotten that young David McIntyre, George's only assist-

ant, was coming. "Well, I'll go home then," I replied, "and try not to be too long." With a wave of the hand he was off.

I rode back that afternoon under the same spell of beauty, now intensified by the veritable hive of activity going on in and around the factory buildings as I entered. George was already in the factory, and a lovely, warm, pungent, aromatic smell, which seemed to come from inside the factory itself, pervaded the atmosphere. Small boys were busily carrying baskets of green leaf on their heads into the building and a long line of pluckers stood some distance away beside a little shed where each one was having the contents of his basketful of afternoon plucking carefully weighed. The low hum of machinery in action was audible all around. I had little idea how the fresh green leaf finally appeared as the finished product which reached the grocery store shelves, but I was quite astonished, even on this first brief trip through the factory buildings, to find what a scientific and exacting business the manufacture of the green leaf is.

"We'll have a look at one of the leaf houses first," George said, steering me in the direction of what looked like a large open-air barn with a corrugated iron roof and long burlap-covered racks running the length of the building. A stairway led into the leaf house where the small boys were brushing the leaf off the racks into their baskets. "Take a handful of leaf and feel it," George said, "this is the withering or first process after plucking; the leaf stays here till it feels like a soft kid glove."

"How long does that take?" I asked as I crumpled a handful of leaf that seemed to me as soft as velvet.

"About eighteen hours, and it has to be thinly spread. There is a chemical as well as a physical process that goes on in the leaf which influences the 'quality' of the eventual tea considerably and this needs time."

After a little more careful scrutiny on George's part we left the leaf house and walked across a strip of neatly cut grass to the factory buildings. I noticed that there appeared to be a number of leaf houses all round and that there were many racks in each, one above the other. Small boys were filling baskets with leaf and carrying it across to the factory. Machinery was moving in all directions, inside

the factory itself. It was intensely hot and smelled of warm jasmine. We stopped at a large, round, brass-topped table which was revolving at great speed with its load of leaf. There were several of these tables all in a row.

"This rolling breaks up the green leaf," George explained, "and the process also has to be very carefully timed." Men stripped to the waist were operating the various machines. From the factory we walked into a large, cool and quite dark room where what looked like masses of brown seaweed were lying spread on the stone floor.

"Whatever is *this*?" I asked in astonishment.

"This is your 'nice cup of tea,' in the fermenting stage," he replied, "the leaf has to ferment in the dark before it finally goes through the firing machines which dry it into the black twists you are accustomed to seeing. The fermenting, or oxidation, takes about two and a half to three hours, according to the temperature—the ideal being to color the fermented leaf up to the shade of a bright new penny."

"What a performance!" I laughed. "I never imagined anything like this."

"This is just a brief résumé to begin with. You will learn more of the details in time. Over in the corner there"—he pointed to the far end of the factory as we emerged into the warm and perfumed building from the cool darkness—"are the firing machines. We can go out that way." Enormous mounds of crisp black leaf were lying on tarpaulins on the floor, and in the opposite corner women were sifting the finished leaf through large sieves.

"Why do they do that?" I asked, pointing to the corner.

"They are removing pieces of stalk which spoil the appearance of the tea and detract from its price," George explained. "The finest teas have little golden flecks in them which we call 'tip.'" He picked up a small handful of the still warm black leaf, and running his finger over it he called my attention to the little orange-coloured specks. Tea was being packed all around into fifty-pound zinc-lined chests for the long journey by river, rail and sea to the markets of the world.

Tea had been just another of those things, I thought to myself as we walked slowly up the hill to the bungalow, something that was always in the house at home and vaguely associated with George as

far back as I could remember, but all that went into the growing and manufacture of the finished article was an entirely different story. And I carried the same thoughts with me as I was bathing and changing in readiness for our dinner guest. I was anxious to meet the second in command of a job that had so many fascinating angles.

A quick glance around my shining living room assured me that all was in order. The fire was burning brightly and I was delighted with the result of the handiwork of the durzi or tailor, a cross-eyed and wizened old man who had been produced by Abdul from somewhere in the bazaar and who sat on the floor in the corner of the verandah, his machine in front of him, and turned the dozens of yards of flowered linen Mother had packed for me into the most attractive slip covers. I had been intrigued at the way he held the material in his toes, leaving both hands free to work the old machine which rattled like a lot of tin cans on a string.

A hearty "Hullo there" outside suddenly announced the arrival of our guest, and the moment I set eyes on young David I was so forcefully reminded of my youngest brother Johnny that for a few seconds I could hardly speak. It wasn't only his very large hands and feet and the small crop of freckles beneath his dancing blue eyes. There was the same open, ingenuous, warm kind of friendliness that was almost naive without being the least effeminate, the same ready wit and sense of fun which so often covered a deep and sincere nature. The moment he walked into the living room a long and expressive whistle escaped his lips.

"My goodness!" He ran his fingers through his somewhat unruly fair hair. "What a transformation if I may say so, why, it looks just like home."

"It certainly does." George smiled broadly. "Now you can see the contents of those forty-six cases it took half the labor force to carry up the hill."

"You must get married as soon as possible," I teased, "and taste the joys of traveling with over two hundred wedding presents."

"I wish I could." His tone was somewhat rueful, and I realized the loneliness that was the lot of all men in the faraway places of the world. "May I just look all round?" David asked like a small boy. "I've almost forgotten what it means to be civilized." There was

something very pleasing about his soft Scottish accent and his boyish enthusiasm. George was bursting with pride, I could see, as he accompanied David on a tour of inspection of the varied collection of pictures, ornaments, lamps, cigarette boxes, silverware and glass. David wanted to see everything. It was the piano that caused him the greatest delight. "May I play?" he turned quickly to me. "I'm no good but I love it just the same."

"Why, of course you may." His gaiety was most infectious. "Play as much as you want." And play he did, beautifully, entirely by ear, and the playing led on to singing, stirring Scottish ballads that increased in vigor and intensity with each passing moment so that George and I could not restrain our quiet laughter at his evident nostalgic enjoyment.

He was most eager to assist in my instruction after dinner when he discovered that I had already begun my lessons in Hindustani. I don't think I could have provided a better form of entertainment for any guest. He and George went into gales of laughter at my efforts and there seemed to be a great deal of underground fun going on which at that time I was in no position to share. I could sense the happy relationship that existed between them and I wondered over and over again how on earth these men managed to exist in lonely outposts throughout the world. I noticed that David's shirt buttons were sewn on with brown thread and that he had rather a unique haircut. Who looked after him if he was ill, I asked myself, and what did he do with himself evening after lonely evening? I discovered that he was quite an expert at candy-making, learned from his sister, and as it became a habit for him to dine with us once a week, I encouraged him to get busy on the back verandah oil stove and work up sufficient fudge and peppermint creams to last the week.

This first evening together had coincided with the annual celebration of the Diwali or festival of the lights. It was a prosperity festival and the Hindu gods particularly were invoked to look kindly on all cattle for the coming year. Myriads of little earthenware oil lamps were lighted around every house and building, and the scene from the height of our bungalow hill was like a fairyland, enchanting me beyond all description. Each small dugout that passed up and down the river was illuminated at bow and stern, giving the

appearance of two large eyes proceeding stealthily in the darkness. "I've never seen anything so fascinating," I said as we sat out on the verandah after my lesson, "it's so absolutely different."

"Different certainly from the lights of Piccadilly," David laughed. He rose to go rather reluctantly.

"I can't tell you what it means to me to have you people here." His young face was wreathed in smiles. "And don't let anything get you down." With which piece of fatherly advice offered in all seriousness he disappeared whistling into the night.

I could still see the Diwali lights as I lay in bed thinking; the normal silence of the night was broken for once by the monotonous tom-tom of drums in the distance. Somewhere in the jungle a night bird uttered a raucous screech. "Don't let anything get you down," the words revolved in my brain over and over and over again, "not anything, not the jungle, or the loneliness, or the climate, or the snakes and wild beasts and the fear of failure, or the silence . . . the awful, nerve-wracking perpetual silence. . . ."

Chapter 12

IT WAS WHEN the household chores had been completed that there came the long hours when there was absolutely nothing to do. I was thrown entirely upon my own resources. I found it hard to get used to George in his role of worker. He was completely devoted to his job and with him a job well done was the guiding principle of his life. I liked him to be that way but I often found it difficult to reconcile the devotedly tender and loving companion of the evening hours with the busy and efficient master who held the reins of government so firmly during the daytime over so many people. Once George's feet were in his slippers in the morning, his mind was far away on the problems of the day.

Usually I went for a ride round the nearer end of the plantation, after the main duties had been taken care of and before the sun got too hot. Nero had my bath waiting when I got back and would laughingly help me struggle out of my riding boots. She kept up a ceaseless flow of chatter, for all the world as if she believed I understood what she was saying. She was always delighted when I would point to this article or that and have her tell me over and over again how to pronounce the words properly. We were really more like a couple of children together than mistress and maid. She was such a joyous little creature and it always fascinated me to hear the jingle-jangling of her many-colored glass bangles and silver anklets as she moved quietly about the room. While I had my bath she would already be busy ironing the garments I had worn the day before and which dried with such incredible speed in the warm sunshine. She had a unique iron which she handled expertly. The bottom part of it contained a space which was filled with little pieces of hot charcoal which she got from the kitchen, and by a series of gentle blowings into its inside she managed to keep it at a pretty even heat. She seemed to find the laces and ribbons intriguing, and often she would stop and examine them with minute care.

To the verandah where I sat for long stretches of time, the sounds of the many activities going on below in the factory compound would be carried up in the stillness of my surroundings—the shout of a voice, the banging of a hammer, the sawing of wood, the barking of a dog, the splash of a dugout on the river. I almost envied the people their work. I knew that I ought to draw up a program for filling the hours when I was alone. I could knit and sew. Mother had packed any amount of knitting wool and petit-point which I loved to do. The garden was simply crying out for attention, and there was ample space for me to give rein to any plan I might conceive in the way of landscaping. I had the piano, endless books to read, and letters to write in abundance, and indeed I did occupy myself with all these things in turn. But it was mostly when I was writing letters that the little demon of homesickness would at times get me by the throat. I longed to hear a telephone or a doorbell ring, to make contact with the outside world, to see Mother and Father and the boys for just a little while, to mill around town with Pat or go to a show. But the moment George came in the mists rolled away and I would assure him that his concern as to whether I was lonesome was needless. And sometime or other, I always told myself, I was going to have that farm I'd always longed for. There was room enough and to spare for chickens and ducks and cows and probably many other animals wild and tame!

When he had gone out again after lunch and the servants had taken themselves to their own quarters to prepare and eat their food, and bathe, and wash their clothes, it was, to me, the longest part of the day. I was restless and unsettled, I had the strange feeling of having somehow come to the end of the line—the sort of queer empty feeling one always has at the end of a good show or when visiting guests have departed, or after the return from a holiday. I felt flat and detached and for all the world like a freshman in school. If I saw a dugout rounding the bend in the river I would rush for the opera glasses to see if by chance the occupants had white faces. Always they were black. Strange and fearsome-looking insects crawled on the floors and small lizards ran squeaking across the walls in the living room. Sometimes they fell with a loud plop onto the floor, making me nearly jump out of my skin.

George had warned me to be on the lookout for snakes, and never

to walk in long grass or put my hand into the lovely flowering shrubs, and never, *never* to move around at night even into the bathroom without a handlamp. Sometimes I took the dogs down to the river if they were not with George; they loved to swim after sticks as long as I would continue throwing them. Sometimes I watched the gardeners working in the vegetable garden which produced almost every vegetable we grew in England. I seemed to lack the initial push to get me going in the various directions in which I could find ample occupation, and it disgusted me that I was so "weak," as Edward would have expressed it. Very rarely I lay down or slept in the daytime. When the English mail came in once a week I would save my letters from the evening until next afternoon and then read them in my bedroom, for often the detailed epistles from the family, especially Father's letters, would bring them so near to me that I would end in tears. I did not want George to see, though he did catch me one afternoon, when he came unexpectedly to the dressing room to fetch some papers from a private file. I heard his step and quickly I wiped my face, and lay with my eyes tight shut. For several seconds he stood beside my bed while I dared hardly breathe, then quietly he tiptoed out of the room; but I noticed that he watched me very closely all that evening and I tried to be especially gay and animated.

In the late afternoons when he was finished we usually either rode, or poled up the river to fish, or walked the dogs. Occasionally we stopped by the little whitewashed hospital to which he paid an almost daily visit. A soft green banana grove surrounded the hospital by the river bank. I shall always remember the impression that Dr. Chanda, the Indian doctor, made on me the first time I saw him there. He was sitting at his desk in the little office that led off a spotlessly clean corridor. He was tall and broad-shouldered with a clever and intelligent face. There was something about his eyes that held my attention; they expressed a warmth and friendliness and a depth of human understanding that drew me to him immediately. He was dressed in western attire, spoke excellent English, and his manner was quiet and very courteous. I could hardly wait to question George about him after he smilingly bowed us out when George had made the necessary inquiries about the progress of the patients in his care.

"What a fine-looking man," I said as we walked away. "Is he a good doctor?"

"First class," George answered warmly. "He has very good degrees from the hospital in Calcutta where he trained, and he also is very experienced in tropical medicine generally."

"How did he come here?" I was keenly interested in anything to do with doctors.

"Ted sent him to me. He went to him looking for a job where he could make a study of malaria and dysentery and so on, and there is plenty of it in Assam."

"Will the coolies go to a doctor?" I asked.

"Some will and some won't if they are particularly superstitious. But he has a way with them which is worth its weight in gold." Each plantation, George explained, has a hospital where treatment is entirely free. The best drugs are provided by the company owning the estate, and a British doctor visits as well and is always available for urgent cases.

We had hardly reached the bungalow and sat down to tea when we heard a shrill whistle and the next moment a large red setter came bounding up the stairs. "That's Carstairs' dog." George rose to his feet. "He must be coming to visit us." Our social life, as I have said, was so simple that apart from David's evenings with us I had so far met nobody. We had missed the Turners' open house twice in a row and were going to them the following Sunday. The very idea of an unexpected visitor was to me quite a thrilling prospect. George had walked out onto the verandah to meet our guest, and the next moment I was being greeted by a charming, poised, self-assured man of about thirty-five. His dog meantime was having a wild and exuberant free-for-all with our two, round and round the rooms and in and out of the verandah.

"I hope you don't object to this?" Mr. Carstairs smiled as we shook hands, and he produced a chain from his coat pocket. "I'll tie him at once if you do, but George knows that where I go he goes."

"Why, I love it," I answered warmly. "Please don't chain him—they are having a wonderful time."

At that moment Abdul appeared from the back verandah, carrying an enormous sheaf of the most exquisite pale green orchids and

a large basket of oranges. "Just a small token of my esteem," said Mr. Carstairs; the voice was slightly bantering, a little too casual. "I had the boatmen cut the orchids as we came down the river; the oranges I grow myself."

"Oh, how lovely!" I took the orchids from Abdul. "Why, I have never seen such gorgeous ones before. You couldn't have brought anything more beautiful."

"You will stay for dinner, Carstairs, won't you?" George said, handing him the cigarettes. "Stay the night if you can, we'd be delighted."

"No, thanks, I won't stay overnight, I must get back and I don't mind the trip up the river at night, in fact I prefer it."

There is something unusual about this man, I said to myself. I've been brought up with men and I should know, though for the life of me I had no idea what it was. Surreptitiously I had a good look at him as he stood with George before the fire, talking "shop." The face was keen, the features regular, and dark curling brown hair matched the deep brown of his rather arresting eyes. His hair needed cutting though, and the fingernails were not as clean as one would have expected in a man who wore a suit that was obviously expensive in every detail, with tie, silk handkerchief and socks that matched perfectly. During dinner his eyes frequently rested on me with an enigmatical expression. He was well-read, travelled, had certainly known wealth but in some way he was "different." He had me completely puzzled. I listened with interest after dinner as he and George reverted to "shop" once again. I heard of the misfortunes of blight, flood, an unseasonal hailstorm, labor trouble, a factory burned down, all of which had befallen various plantations during George's absence in Bombay. News certainly travels in the jungle, I said to myself. The London tea market had also apparently taken a skid in the last few days, and good old somebody in a neighboring district had had a bad fall at polo. Somebody else's baby had arrived unexpectedly and only her nearest neighbor had been present. "Where on earth does he get all his information?" I asked myself more than once. George seemed to be getting a little restless but I found it all most highly entertaining. By the time the evening was over, Mr. Carstairs' tongue had become a little thick, his voice louder, his

statements somewhat wild and overly opinionated. I couldn't get anything much out of George about him, later, in bed. He only assured me that he was "really a very nice fellow and led pretty much of a hermit's life." But I was intrigued, and determined to find out more in my own good time.

Chapter 13

MY FIRST VISIT to the Turners had been preceded by a certain amount of apprehension on my part. I had always been afflicted by the most uncomfortable waves of shyness at meeting a group of strangers. George had told me what a tremendous amount of speculation there always was in the district at the prospect of a new bride! What was she going to be like, how old was she said to be—would she settle to the jungle life, had she any money, would she be able to ride and play tennis and so on. A little new blood was as good as a play, and apparently everyone within a radius of about fifty miles tried to make a point of being present when the bride made her first appearance for public scrutiny.

"I told them you were bow-legged and in your late thirties, of course," George grinned at me across the dinner table the night before we were to attend my first open house, "so they are quite prepared!"

I had been too well schooled in remarks of that sort all my life to do anything more than flash a look of cold scorn in his direction. "Tell me what the Turners are like and the rest of the neighbors who are likely to be there."

"Julie Turner is about five-foot-two, blue-eyed and brown-haired and what she lacks in stature she makes up for in personality and strength of character." George leaned back in his chair and lighted a cigarette. "Old Sam is a great big gangling jovial fellow with a bald spot on top of his auburn head and an immense capacity for leg-pulling so you can be prepared for anything." He smiled through the curling blue smoke.

"Well, I'm quite used to that," I laughed. "How long have they been out here?"

"Sam about sixteen years, I think, and Julie about eleven. They have a boy and a girl at home in Scotland, at school. Sam is a mag-

nificent shot and a fine planter and Julie just twists him round her small fingers with incredible skill."

"What veterans!" I groaned. "I wonder if I shall ever be able to say I have been out here that length of time. I feel such an apprentice when I think of meeting these people. Who else will be there?"

"Oh, I should say probably Thompson, Bradshaw, Smith, Wilkins, Horner, Merryweather, Jackson and Coats. Carstairs too, most likely."

"No women?" I exclaimed in surprise.

"All bachelors except Wilkins," George laughed at my evident amazement, "and Mrs. Wilkins is still in England with the children." I couldn't help thinking what a paradise it would be for any unattached female determined to acquire a husband.

"You'll like them all," George assured me as we rose from the table, "and Julie I know will be a wonderful friend. The only snag is that she hates being on the river so I don't suppose we shall see her up here very often." The evident admiration in George's voice raised a determination in me to study particularly this small, strong woman who must have learned all the answers to jungle living during her eleven years of residence.

I dressed with the greatest care next morning after an early lunch. I hoped most fervently that I had chosen the right sort of dress for the evening. I had asked George about it and he had said just to take "something fluffy," which seemed a comprehensive enough answer from his point of view. I chose a plain white pique dress for tennis and decided on a black flowered chiffon dinner frock for later, after turning out almost the entire contents of my wardrobe in a dither of indecision. Whatever I wore would look stunning, I thought to myself rather ruefully, topped off by the odious mosquito boots which of course had to go along as well. Looking in the mirror as I finally finished dressing, I did hope that Julie would like me, and that I should like her. It was going to be a bit of an ordeal anyhow and as we finished the last mile of the drive through the jungle trail after the river trip I began to feel a sense of extreme uneasiness. I slipped my hand through George's arm as he drove whistling at the top of his voice.

"Nervous, darling?" he smiled down at me, and I nodded my head vigorously. "There's nothing to worry about," he answered reassur-

ingly, "they're a grand crowd, and I'm as proud as a dog with two tails." We turned off the trail into a grassy driveway flanked on either side by tall palm trees. A large white gate stood already open through which we approached one of the most lovely gardens I had ever seen. Sweeping green lawns were offset by beds and borders of exquisite flowers. Everywhere a riot of color and profusion surrounded the bungalow, and our host and hostess stood waiting for us by the verandah steps.

As I looked into the keen, appraising blue eyes of Julie Turner as she welcomed us I realized at once that I was shaking hands with one of those small persons who somehow have both feet planted firmly on the ground. I was quite sure that she had summed me up from head to toe in that first steady, cool, but kindly look which seemed to envelop me and I felt a sudden surge of shyness that made me wish I could clamber up into the buggy with George and drive away again immediately. She had one of those penetrating, comprehensive ways of taking in everything at a glance. But Sam Turner won my heart from the very first moment. His jovial and unswerving good humor and fun masked a deep and sensitive personality. I felt that he was fully aware of my feeling as I was introduced to the "district" under the tall palm trees that surrounded the tennis courts, at the side of the old rambling two-storied bungalow. He chose me as his partner for the first set of tennis and kept up a continual flow of good-natured badinage all round. Every one of the ten present was charming and showed a remarkable interest in my welfare but the scrutiny that went with it all, though kindly and quite natural, was nevertheless an ordeal which I shall always remember. Tea was beautifully served on the lawn and how I envied Julie her flow of Hindustani, and the ease with which she managed everything. Everyone stayed to dinner and later some played bridge, but Sam took me round the bungalow showing me the many and wonderful trophies of his big game expeditions. I had no idea if some of the stirring tales he told me were true or whether he was just pulling my leg, but when he discovered that I was well versed in the gentle art of teasing and self-defense his joy knew no bounds and we became the firmest of friends from that day forward.

Julie invited me to come down and spend the day with her as often as I liked. It took me some little time to screw up my cour-

age to do the trip by river, and then drive eight miles through the jungle trail on my own! But screw up my courage I did, and sang at the top of my voice all the whole eight miles, little realizing that Sam and Julie could hear me coming for minutes before I became visible. There was always a vociferous welcome awaiting me.

I was deeply impressed with the ease and skill with which Julie managed her housekeeping, herself and her husband. She kept house beautifully, and devoted a great part of her time to her beautiful garden. She did not share my passion for animals or anything in the nature of a farm. Next to her garden her hobbies were painting and photography, flower paintings being predominant in her work. She wrote almost daily letters to her children and mailed them once a week. She was a woman who had found herself in every sense of the word. Reserved and somewhat critical as she was, she nevertheless had the kindest heart on earth when you got to know her, and Sam's only complaint was that she snored most abominably for such a small woman!

"I wish I could speak the language like you do," I said to her one morning. It was about the third or fourth time I had gone down the river on my own to spend the day with her. "And feel that I knew something about everything," I added with a laugh.

She was going through the daily routine with the cook and the store cupboard. "Give yourself time, my dear," she said, "I floundered around for months at first before I could even get over my homesickness."

"Oh, I get homesick all right at times," I picked up the lid of a tin that had fallen on the floor, "but I don't seem to get on very fast with the garden and I find the time drags a bit when George is out. I always was a great chatterbox and I want somebody to talk to! When I do talk to the servants it's by signs and a sort of deaf and dumb language."

"How well I know what you mean," she laughed as she locked the storeroom door and slipped the key into her pocket, "but it all works out in time and you'll find that the more you get to know about the plantation and everything else the more you'll realize how much you are needed."

"That I can imagine," I answered with conviction. I couldn't visualize a place on the globe where women were more needed.

"Let's go out into the garden." She slipped her hand through my arm. "The sweet peas need picking so badly and they are at their best right now."

I ran my eye over the long herbaceous borders that flanked the front lawn; a feast of color, they matched any I had seen at home in England. Flowering shrubs were everywhere and great beds of violets grew close up against the bungalow. "I will have a garden like yours or burst in the effort," I announced firmly.

"Well, there is no reason why you shouldn't, my dear," she was frankly amused, "and it's the most rewarding thing I know. I shall be dividing up all sorts of things in another month or two before the hot weather comes and you can have anything you like from here."

"Oh, thank you, Julie," I answered warmly, "that I would love." Together we picked sweet peas from a thick hedge of blooms while she chatted to me about gardening and its joys in general. When we had each a huge basketful of flowers she led the way to a small arbor covered in rambler roses, under which were deep cane chairs. She called the boy and gave some orders, and in a short while he reappeared with cool drinks and a bunch of mending which he set down beside Julie. "I can't imagine how bachelors live out here," I said as I watched her deft fingers working on Sam's socks.

"It is pretty hard," she agreed. "Most of them just exist, they don't really bother to look after anything."

"And it's so terribly lonely for them." I cupped my hands to catch an exquisite little butterfly but without success. "I always think that Mr. Carstairs is a very lonely soul, and a very unusual man as well." Julie put down her sewing and looked at me so keenly I wondered what on earth I had said. "He doesn't seem to belong here at all somehow, that's the feeling I have about him, anyway," I concluded.

"Maybe he doesn't," she answered slowly after a pause, her blue eyes still holding my gaze, after which she shut up like a clam and for a while I sat in mystified silence. I was more convinced than ever that there was something behind Carstairs but my better judgment led me to change the subject.

"Do you always wear mosquito boots, Julie?" I asked lightly.

"Yes, I do. Why, don't you? You surely must."

"Oh yes, I do, of course, but I hate the things. Often I wiggle

them off under the table during dinner, but George caught me the other night and he was really quite cross with me."

"Not for long I'm sure," she teased as she rethreaded her needle, "but it really is important."

It had been long enough, though, I thought with a twinge of unhappiness, for it had been the first time that George had ever really been cross with me. We had just finished dinner and were about to leave the table when he bent to pick up his napkin from the floor and had discovered that my legs were not inside their boots under the table. "Why, Monica," and there had been the sound of battle in that exclamation, "you haven't got your boots on . . . What on earth are you thinking of!" He had looked at me with such an expression of disgust that I could find no words to reply as I quickly shuffled my feet into the hot canvas monstrosities and pulled them up around my knees. "Do you mean to tell me you have been sitting like that every night?" he demanded uncompromisingly.

"No, not every night," I answered weakly. I felt as if I was once more the small girl before the tribunal of authority. "They are so dreadfully hot and uncomfortable," I added lamely, feeling as guilty as if I had stolen the money from a blind man's cup.

"Malaria is much more hot and uncomfortable." His voice had been almost sarcastic. "You are being absolutely childish over this matter of wearing your boots. You have always been such a good sport in meeting a challenge, why in heaven's name must you balk at this?" There had been a horrible pricking sensation behind my eyes. What man could ever understand a passion for pretty shoes, I asked myself wildly, what was the use of trying to explain, especially to an infuriated George whose wrath was wholly justified? "Don't ever let me catch you without your boots again." The edge was still in his voice as we left the table. "I have explained the necessity of this to you over and over again."

"I'm sorry, darling," I had answered miserably. There was nothing else that I could say and for the rest of the evening a certain chilling aloofness on George's part thrust me, as he no doubt intended it should, into the depths of misery, dispelled only at long last by his tender kisses of forgiveness at bedtime.

"I can assure you malaria is no fun," I heard Julie saying. "I've

had it and I know. I got mine sitting up for a tiger with Sam half the night, and lost a baby in consequence. It can be dangerous, you know."

"How long did it take you to get a grip on things?" I asked, gently changing the unpleasant subject.

"I think it's just as long as you make it, really." She smiled kindly at me over her darning. "I was brought up as an only child in a country vicarage. I had never been in a city for long like you have. But even so I don't think you will have any trouble once you really get going, and anyone with half an eye can see that you two were made for each other and that makes all the difference." It was so like Julie to give one the necessary boost, I grew to realize more and more as I got to know her better, and I shall always know, too, that it was she and Sam who little by little eased me along the way with their example and their kindness and their understanding. Julie even put her dislike of the river in her pocket and came up to visit us from time to time, though not as often as we should have liked.

It was about three weeks after this visit with Julie that I was going down again to collect a lot of things from her garden for ours. George told me that Sam also wanted to know if our overseer who owned the elephants that were working out in our new extension in the jungle could supply some elephants to do some work for Sam. "Would you like to walk out to the extension with me this afternoon, while I inquire?" George asked at lunch. "Then you can take a message down with you." I knew that I must sometime overcome a certain reluctance I had at the thought of going right into the jungle and there was no time like the present, so I agreed at once that I would very much like to go. George eyed me closely for a moment but made no comment, and we started off about two o'clock.

Chapter 14

THE EXTENSION lay at the far end of the plantation in deep, heavy, virgin jungle, and we were to take a path right through this jungle to reach the clearing where the elephants and men were working. It was my first excursion into the towering, majestic forest which I had seen as yet only from the outside. My excitement at the prospect lessened a little as we reached the path that seemed to disappear into a narrow, inky-black channel. George walked just ahead of me and at first as we entered it was impossible to see anything. Very quickly, though, my eyes became accustomed to the absence of light and I suddenly felt as if I had entered some vast and centuries-old cathedral. The air was dank and chilly, the silence almost overpowering, and yet I sensed a teeming of unseen life. Huge ferns and tangled masses of creepers grew shoulder high, and here and there a faint slant of sunlight penetrated the dimness giving much the same effect as of sunshine filtering through stained-glass windows, for the branches of the enormous trees were of light and dark green shading away to bronze and brown and tawny copper. I shouldn't have been surprised to hear the softly swelling strains of a mighty organ filling the air or to see George reverently removing his topee. Nevertheless, I shivered slightly as I looked at the tangled mass of jungle each side of us and up into the mighty dome above where massive branches met and mingled in one long and everlasting embrace. Anything might be lurking within inches of us. I didn't want to go another yard. George was hacking away with a pruning knife at a most wicked-looking creeper that had long sharp thorns growing about every two inches along its knotted stems.

"Follow me closely," he called over his shoulder. "I don't want you to get pricked with these," and stopping for a moment to clear the path he turned and smiled broadly at me. "Well, what do you think of the jungle from the inside?"

I should like to have said that I was scared to death at the damp, still and, to me, terrifying surroundings, that I had a weak feeling in my knees and that I wanted to get out immediately, but he was so obviously calm and at home and eager for my reaction that he instilled a certain confidence for which I was very grateful. "It's awe-inspiring," I answered truthfully, "and however tall are the trees?"

"Over a hundred feet I should say, some of these Nahors and Hollungs." He looked up admiringly. "I never get tired of looking at them."

I uttered a silent prayer that I might perhaps reach that very enviable state of mind some day. I could see their majestic beauty but I preferred it from the outside as yet. I was sure that many unseen eyes were looking at me. "We're almost at the clearing now." George was chopping away again at the creeper. "I usually ride in from the elephant path a little ahead of where we took this trail, but I wanted you to see a less open approach."

"That was sweet of you, my pet," I said to myself, "but anything more open than this would have been perfectly all right with me!" And then the next moment the path suddenly did open onto a large clearing covered with felled trees and huge stumps, the clearing itself still being surrounded with jungle similar to that which we had just come through. Over in the far corner of the clearing two elephants were pulling enormous tree stumps out of the ground and a group of natives were busily cutting away at underbrush and small branches. The overseer, clad in khaki shorts, shirt and a solar topee, was standing by watching, a rifle under his arm. "There must be some hunting going on today," George remarked. "Ramdas doesn't usually carry a gun."

"Tigers?" I suggested rather weakly.

"No, no," George laughed, "not at all likely just here, but he is an excellent shot and he has probably heard a deer somewhere nearby. I'll just go over and ask him about the elephants. You stay here a few minutes, will you?" The overseer had seen us immediately and started to walk across the clearing to meet George. I stepped up onto a log that was partly covered in ferns and felt in my pocket for a lump of toffee that the cook had made us as a special demonstration of his prowess. About ten yards to my left two young boys

were laughingly endeavoring to move quite a sizable tree stump without much success, and it fascinated me to watch the fun they were evidently enjoying to the full. I glanced across at George who was looking up into a tree not far from us to which Ramdas was pointing. At that same moment I experienced the sensation one has when the rug on which you are standing is gently but surely pulled away a little from under you. I stood absolutely still for a moment and then the same thing seemed to happen again. George was walking towards me with Ramdas, and in the next split second everything happened at once. One of the boys on my left suddenly let out a terrific shriek, leaping back from the log at which they were hauling, pulling his companion with him. Ramdas and George apparently realized what was going on for Ramdas strode forward like a piece of greased lightning while George in a couple of bounds grabbed me by the arm and pulled me into the clearing with such force that I almost choked on my toffee. Two shots rang out at the same time and from all corners of the clearing natives waving sticks and spears came running and shouting to our corner. Too amazed to be scared I just hung onto George's arm in complete bewilderment.

"Keep calm," his tone was quiet and authoritative, "there's nothing to be alarmed about, they've got him."

"Got who?" I was completely calm, strangely enough. I merely wanted to know what all the excitement was about.

"Come and see." George was smiling now and together we joined the jabbering, squealing group gathered round Ramdas who was on his knees twisting a rope round something that was half concealed by short underbrush. "That, my dear girl, is a good-sized python."

A python! My heart missed a beat as the recollection of the strange sensation beneath my feet flashed across my mind. "But . . . do you mean to say . . .?" George took the words out of my mouth.

"Yes, I do mean to say," he laughed, "you were standing on it, just like that."

"Oh, my goodness!" Mere words seemed inadequate to express my feelings. I still couldn't get the picture at all but it was obvious that the thing was dead, the time for fear was over, and Ramdas was on his feet gently hauling away at a large vari-colored mass which he pulled at last from its covering of jungle out into the clear-

ing. An enormous lump bulged its stomach if one can define where the stomach might be in a long object that filled me with revulsion.

"Ramdas was just telling me that a seventeen-foot python had been seen round a branch of one of these trees this morning," George explained. "It must have gone down into the underbrush. Its head moving towards those two boys was what caught their attention while you were comfortably perched on its middle!" He laughed. "Do you feel all right, darling?"

"I feel perfectly fine," I assured him, for far from being upset, a strange sense of exhilaration had taken hold of me. I could now take my place with Sam and the many others who had had fantastic and unusual jungle experiences. I could talk about this forever whether anyone believed me or not. I felt as if I had won my first spurs, though I had to admit the effect of the whole thing was rather spoiled by the fact that I hadn't known what I was doing or I should probably have run for my life. A sudden shout went up from the little band gathered round the snake and the next moment I was utterly sickened to see the limp body of a baby deer extricated from the "bulge" by Ramdas. George explained that its poor little body had had every bone in it broken by the snake's curling itself around it in a deadly stranglehold, whereafter it had swallowed it whole and would not require another meal for some considerable time.

"Madam shall have the skin of the python." Ramdas was cleaning his hands with some ferns. "It is a very fine specimen." The thin, agile little jungle man was quietly triumphant, but Madam wasn't particularly keen, and a nice cup of tea in front of the bungalow fire was a better thought to her at that moment. But the skin was dried and cured and eventually safely delivered in London to the boys, with a very colorful description on my part of the desperate adventures that went along with the housekeeping in the life of their little sister.

I couldn't wait to tell Sam and Julie of my experience and it was received in the most satisfying manner possible for my ego. Sam said he had never heard of anyone coming up against such a situation and was really quite impressed. But Julie was not herself. I thought her eyes were red from weeping, and indeed later in the morning for the first and last time in my memory I saw her com-

pletely overcome with grief and broken in spirit. One of her children was in hospital, she had heard by cable, and it was not certain yet what the trouble was. It was suddenly revealed to me just what a tragedy this business is in the tropics of having to part with your children at an early age. Probably George's mother had been broken like this; perhaps I should have to face the same thing myself one day. I shuddered at the thought and yet what was the alternative, unless one decided to stay at home with the children as some did who could not face the prospect of leaving them, and then what of the husband? It was a cruel and inevitable choice. Perhaps it was because I was not feeling well myself that Julie's distress upset me so much, though I longed to be able to comfort her and do something to help. My head ached unbearably and I went home earlier than usual.

Next morning I still felt wretched and I could not get Julie out of my mind. The only thing to do was to get busy and I determined to begin answering a pile of letters on my desk, starting with Pat. I unscrewed my pen firmly.

My dearest Pat,

Two letters came from you together which was wonderful, and in both, your chief anxiety seems to be a thirst for knowledge as to what there is to do all day. Frankly, I can answer that in one word, which is *NOTHING!* That is to say, if you mean in comparison with home and all its many activities which are a part of the accepted daily round. I know it must sound devastating, and be as hard for you to understand as it was for me, just what life is like surrounded by dense jungle and little else for miles and miles. When all the excitement of arriving is over it is rather like coming abruptly to a dead-end street, so to speak. I've told you in my first letters all about the bungalow, and the servants, and the plantation, and our social life, and my wrestle with the language, and when the chores are done that's it! Your time is your own for the rest of the day! Most mornings I ride for a bit, before it gets too hot, round the more "civilized" parts of the plantation and I wish you could see the glorious orchids that cascade in bunches from the trees at the jungle edge. They are exquisite beyond words. I am in the throes of trying to plan out a garden round the bungalow. George writes out sentences for me to say to the malis (the gardeners) and we get along pretty well except for the day recently when I took out the little speech that had been prepared for the washerman by mistake! As the head mali's face became more and more puzzled and he looked around

somewhat helplessly in the direction of the bungalow, I suppose to see if Abdul was around, it suddenly dawned on me that I was admonishing him not only for using too much soap, but for a scorch mark on one of George's new shirts! The servants are really wonderful, though, Pat, the way they never laugh at my mistakes, and I make plenty. They always listen most courteously and attentively as I read from my little piece of paper. The trouble is that with many words it is just the last syllable or even letter which makes all the difference to the meaning of the word. For instance, the other day I was sitting outside on the lawn with the dogs and it was getting pretty hot, so I thought I'd fix my umbrella onto the chair and I called out to Abdul and asked him to bring my "chatti." He brought the umbrella, but something made me look at my little book of words and I was almost overcome with embarrassment when I read: "Chatti . . . the female breast, chattA . . . umbrella!" Abdul is quite marvelous, however, and always rises to the occasion. George simply howled with laughter when I told him. He teaches me in the evenings as I told you before, and when David is in for dinner he takes a hand in my instruction, and it seems to be the best form of amusement I could possibly provide for them. The servants all retire to their houses after lunch for about two hours, and George goes off again. I hate to lie down, as I believe most women do midday, but fortunately I have always read a lot, as you know, and as George is a great bookworm too, he has shelves and shelves of books which he gets from Calcutta each month. I play the piano and mix up cakes which the cook bakes beautifully, I study the landscape, and knit and dream of you all, and I admit quite frankly I get waves of homesickness at times, especially on mail day when the English mail comes in, but the moment I hear George's whistle as he comes up the path I feel a different being! We often go out on the river and fish before dark and always at the weekends and after my Hindustani lesson in the evenings we sometimes play cards or just sit and talk with the dogs on my lap.

You ask if I think you would like it out here . . .

For a moment the picture of the dancing blue eyes and sleek blonde hair flashed across my memory; somehow I could not picture the restless, changeable, carefree Pat in my present surroundings.

Honestly, my dear, it's almost impossible to say. It depends so much on what sort of an anchor in life you want. I think that to live in this kind of a country you have to love from the heart, otherwise I could imagine it might be impossible to many. I could never have chosen differently because George and I just belong, but even so I know that there are many battles ahead for me and in my moments of loneliness I just pray that I shall always have what it takes to make a success of it all. One

seems to have to be always on one's toes, and the very silence that surrounds one often feels fraught with possibilities, if you can understand. You'll have to try and persuade Auntie to bring you out for a trip next winter—*wouldn't* that be wonderful? Sometimes when I get up in the morning I say to myself, I wish something would happen today, and as often as not it does, as you will have gathered from my previous letters. . . ."

Prophetic words, for hardly was the ink dry on the paper when I was aware of being watched. And yet as I scanned the lawn and the jungle edge I could see no one, though I was certain that I was not alone. A second later the underbrush of the thick jungle slowly parted and four of the fiercest-looking men, almost entirely naked, stepped stealthily out onto the narrow path that led from the jungle to the bungalow along the edge of the lawn. For a moment my heart almost stopped beating for they were unquestionably Nagas, from the nearby head-hunting mountain tribes. I recognized them at once from pictures George had shown me in a book. Their light-skinned high cheekboned faces were hideously painted, they carried long spears and evil-looking knives, and their ear lobes were pierced with large pieces of what looked like bones. Human bones probably, I told myself wildly. Perhaps they had decided that I was to be the next candidate for their yearly human sacrifice. I had no idea how long they had been silently watching me from their secret cover. My first instinct was to turn and run as fast as my legs could carry me . . . but where? It was useless for me to shout for there was nobody to hear, the servants were all in their houses taking their midday rest. As the menacing-looking figures started slowly to approach the bungalow I was petrified. I gripped the arms of my chair and felt as if my whole inside was slowly turning into a jelly. The Nagas were now almost up to the verandah and had started to make a series of the most extraordinary noises one to the other, which I presumed was their method of conversation. "Oh, grasp the nettle," I said to myself against the tumult of my beating heart, "stand up, smile, look nonchalant, carefree, interested, anything, it will soon be over." Quickly I rose to my feet and walked to the verandah railing. The biggest Naga advanced about two feet ahead of his companions, looked straight at me and emitted a loud and penetrating bass note

at the same time smartly thumping the side of his head. I almost fell over the rails into the midst of them, but the very gesture of the head-thumping brought a memory that rushed through me like a charge of electricity. I suddenly remembered that George had told me that Nagas loved nothing better than empty tin cans and old hats. I didn't stop to ask myself how George knew anything of the sort; it was just one of those life-saving thoughts which seem to come in moments of stress. With an airy movement of the arms which I hoped would convey to them my desire that they be seated and I would join them in a minute I turned and rapidly took myself to the storeroom, where I emptied everything that I could lay my eyes on that was a tin. Sugar, cornstarch, flour, baking powder, dried prunes, cocoanut I tipped onto the shelves like a mad thing. Then, my arms full of tins I scurried along the back verandah into the dressing room and gathered up several of my hats and one felt of George's just for good measure. I slackened my pace as I returned to the front of the bungalow to rejoin my guests. They were all eagerly looking up at me, and opening my arms I let out a cascade of empty tins and flower-trimmed headgear. Almost afraid to breathe, I stood back a little and waited for results. The effect of my generosity was electric. As one man these wild and naked creatures pounced upon the treasure with an eerie whoop of joy. At least I was pretty sure it was joy for, jabbering madly, they first picked up the hats, examined them inside and out, put them on in turns, prinked and preened in a manner worthy of any woman the world over in a new hat. The picture of them in their roses and veiling, their velvet bows and straw sailors, was so utterly funny and incongruous that I could not restrain my laughter, and to my immense relief I saw that they were laughing too, and when they were apparently satisfied that each had the style that suited him best, they gathered up the tins and with no further attention to me at all they turned and made for the jungle at a smart trot. I felt suddenly very weak in the knees and very alone and so tremendously relieved I might almost have escaped from the gallows. My letter to Pat remained unfinished. I was overcome with a desire just to lie down for a while. When George came in I said nothing about my terrifying encounter with the nearby savages, for it had suddenly dawned on

me as I lay on the sofa that I had lightheartedly given away his very best and much-cherished London-bought hat in my excitement, in mistake for one that he had once bought in Calcutta and which he hated the sight of because he said it made him look like a clown!

Chapter 15

MY HEADACHE increased in intensity as the evening wore on and I felt utterly wretched. I couldn't imagine what was the matter with me. I noticed that George looked at me several times during dinner with a rather worried expression. I had seen this look during the preceding few weeks but he had said nothing, for which I was more than grateful though I knew very well that one of his chief characteristics was to see all and say very little. We had just finished dinner with which I had only played when I suddenly started to shake from head to toe, as if I had been stricken with the palsy. Ice-cold shivers ran up and down my back and I felt as if I was going to fall to the ground. A look of horror passed over George's face as he leapt from his chair and helped me to my feet.

"You've got malaria." His voice was almost abrupt. "You must get to bed at once." Picking me up in his arms he carried me into our room and helped me undress. I felt so ill I hardly took in his words of sympathy and concern. Every bone in my body felt as if it was being twisted relentlessly by some unseen hand. "You won't have any objection to Chanda coming up to see you immediately, will you?" I heard him ask anxiously as he smothered me in blankets. "You must have the proper doses of quinine without delay and it would take a day or two at least for me to get Ted up here." I shook my head in agreement. I only knew that I felt as if I was dying and that George seemed to have lost his usual composure, that there was a great deal of scurrying and excited chatter going on in the pantry and back verandah and that I wished from the bottom of my heart Father could come.

Nero appeared as from nowhere with hot water bags which she put at my back and my feet and then, taking up her position at the back of my bed, she started gently to massage my forehead with slow, smooth movements of her small fingers which seemed to hold

a magic touch. They brought an easing of the excruciating headache in a comparatively short time. All the while a gentle flow of soothing words poured from her lips few of which I understood, but at that moment we were just two women of no particular race or creed, the one lovingly ministering to the other with an unmistakable bond of love and sympathy that no barrier of language or country could conceal. The cold shivers gradually gave way to a slowly rising fever which seemed to consume me as with the breath of an oven. As Dr. Chanda and George came into the room, Nero quietly slipped away. Ill as I felt, I knew that I should always remember the picture of that Indian doctor's face as he bent over me in the lamp light. His finely chiseled features held such a wealth of character, his quiet and gentle manner stemmed from an obvious inner strength. Here was a man who was sure of himself, calm, poised, immaculate in dress and manner, different only in the color of his skin from many a doctor I had met in our house at home.

"We shall soon have you well again, Madam," he smiled reassuringly, "if you will trust yourself to me and follow the treatment faithfully." His examination had been quick and thorough, his questioning tactful and delicately comprehensive. He had noted in his book that all my life I had till now been aggressively healthy and normal in every way, and that it had only been in the preceding month that I had ever failed to follow the pattern laid down for all women through the ages. At this admission he had glanced quickly at me for an extra second or two, then he continued writing, and I noticed that George was stroking the back of his head as he stood anxiously looking down at me from the other side of the bed. To my misery a strong sense of guilt was added, for if I had worn my boots and taken my daily pill faithfully I probably should not have been in the predicament in which I found myself. Moreover, if I had confided to George the secret hope that had entered my mind several times in the previous week or two he would most likely have been even sterner with me in the matter of boots and pills. But it had been little more than a vague and shadowy hope, and because it was something we both wanted so much I had decided to keep my thoughts to myself for a while longer, and now I felt as if I had been caught cheating. It was all very shattering and I was so hot I felt as if I should burst. "Now Madam," I heard Dr. Chanda

saying, "you will please take the liquid quinine mixture, which I will send immediately, three times a day without fail, two aspirin four-hourly, no solid food, complete rest, and I will see you again early in the morning and"—here he turned from me to George—"please, sir, do not fail to send for me during the night if you are not entirely satisfied with Madam's condition." He was gone as quietly as he had come, leaving me with a feeling of confidence that was never to fail in the days to come. He remained talking with George on the verandah and I fell into an uneasy doze, awakening to find George measuring out a large spoonful of clear-looking mixture which proved to be even more nauseous than the pills. It was indescribably bitter and I felt that I should be lucky if I were able to hold onto it.

"I'll always wear my boots in future, Georgie," I blubbered like an infant. "Be cross with me now and get it over with. I know this is all my fault."

"All I intend to do, is to get you well again," he said soothingly, "then maybe I'll think of spanking you."

"Don't think that I have been keeping anything from you," I begged. "It may be just a thought, I . . ." He stooped and kissed my forehead.

"I understand perfectly, darling, let's not think of another thing just now but getting you over this as quickly as possible. I'm going to bring you some hot tea, and then change the sheets. You're perspiring, aren't you?"

"I feel little rivers of water running all down my chest," I smiled feebly, "and I moved all the sheets yesterday onto the middle shelf in the linen cupboard."

"I'll find them, don't worry, just lie still and keep covered."

All through the night George seemed to be always there beside me. My sheets had to be changed several times. Abdul had elected to remain in the pantry, George said, and he brewed endless pots of tea and fresh lemonade. For the next two or three days I was in misery with rising and falling temperature, aching in every limb. I couldn't retain the thirty grains of quinine a day, which was a complication difficult to deal with, and by the end of forty-eight hours I was almost completely deaf. George left me as little as possible, and during the time he had to be out Nero remained with me.

She would massage my limbs till I fell asleep, then sit quietly on the floor beside me till I awoke. She was a most wonderful little nurse and her tender devotion was as touching as it was sincere.

It was almost a week before I was up again, and sitting out in the garden, and less than two weeks before I was down once more and the whole miserable cycle was repeated in its entirety. A wave of utter dejection enveloped me. The anxiety and weariness which George did his best to conceal only added to my discomfort. What had possessed me to be so pig-headed, I asked myself over and over again. Was it just pure vanity that had made me rebel against wearing my boots when I really longed to wear my many elegant shoes? Was I so immature and lacking in discipline as not to realize that when you live in Rome you have to do as the Romans do? Or, awful thought, was this some form of face-saving? I had heard Father talk of the strange workings of the subconscious mind. Could it be that I harbored an inner, powerful fear of not being big enough for the job? Could it be possible that illness might be an excuse, a refuge? Oh, surely not, I told myself miserably as I tossed and turned. George and I were just part of one another, we shared one of those rare and deeply satisfying relationships born of a love and understanding that were vouchsafed to few in this life. I just couldn't get along without him. Besides, I mused, you can't get malaria unless you are bitten by the female mosquito and I could have been as well bitten on the arms or neck as merely around the ankles. That was a comforting thought for what it was worth. Oh, I *must* shake out of this thing, I groaned inwardly. I must get down more earnestly to the making of the garden, going in for chickens seriously, more cows, speed up my Hindustani. I couldn't be licked, almost at the start like this, it was unthinkable, and there wasn't anything that Julie Turner had done that I couldn't, and it just tore at my heart to see George looking so worried and tired all because of me. The second attack appeared to be yielding more quickly than the first had done, for which I was thankful, but I was miserably weak and restless, and then, like a bolt from the blue, my temperature suddenly shot up one evening to 105°, and I slipped into a state of delirium and remembered practically nothing for the next forty-eight hours with the exception of a brief few moments when I was aware that Julie and Sam and Dr. Chanda were somehow in the

room, and George was sitting beside me, his face buried in his hands. But, even so, it did not seem to mean anything to me. I was sitting under an apple tree at the Farm with Aunt Helen most of the time, and when I finally came to the surface again I noticed that it was raining, big, heavy, leaden-sounding rain, and that I was alone with Dr. Chanda and that he was smiling happily.

The desire uppermost in my mind during the succeeding few days was to see the dark shadows under George's eyes disappear as quickly as possible, shadows that were more revealing and eloquent than any words could have been as to what he had suffered. His joy at my recovery seemed to be tempered with a vague quietness, almost a detachment every once in a while, which I found strangely disturbing for it was so unlike his usual self. On the first evening following the day on which I had been up most of the time in our room he suggested that we have dinner out on the verandah. He had pulled the wide cane sofa up to the front of the porch so that we faced the beautiful view of the mountains beyond the river. The heavy rains had made the air warm and balmy and a big round moon was slowly rising in the gathering dusk. The peace and beauty of the familiar scene once more gave me a wonderful lift, yet even so I was, deep down, perplexed and restless. George had hardly eaten any dinner and I had a feeling that he was in some way far, far away from me, that he had something on his mind, that he was carrying a burden that for the first time he had not been able to share with me. We could read each other always like the proverbial open book and though we had chatted and laughed through dinner, still there was something between us which caused me an increasing apprehension. When the table was removed and the servants had gone for the night, George drew the footstool up beside me and felt in his pocket for his pipe which he put in his mouth without lighting. After a moment he put it back in his pocket again and leaning forward he settled the cushions at my back, then gathered my hands in his.

"Are you really feeling almost yourself again?" he asked eagerly. "You don't know how thankful I am to have you up once more."

"I'm feeling wonderful." I laughed softly and loosing one hand I ran my fingers through the soft fair hair that the moonlight had turned to silver. "But Georgie, it's you I'm worrying about," I said

after a moment. "Is there anything the matter? . . . You seem to be far away from me somehow."

"Oh, I'm a little tired," his voice was low, "but that's quite understandable." Gently he squeezed my hands.

"That's not all of it," I answered, searching his face. "You know we can't hide anything from each other like that."

For a few seconds he did not reply and then with the deepest sigh which caught my heart and twisted it in a sudden inexplicable pain he pressed his face against my hands. "There is something I want to say to you, my darling." His voice was controlled, yet I could tell at once that he was deeply moved, fighting to keep himself emotionally stable, and a wild swift current of fear enveloped me so that I held my breath till he continued speaking. "It's something that I want you to understand but I . . ." The words trailed away against my hands.

"Georgie, what is it . . . tell me," I implored. "Don't you love me any more? Have I been too much trouble? Oh, just tell me that you do love me still . . . always." I had slid my feet onto the floor and we were looking deep into each other's faces in the moonlight.

"O, angel, don't," he covered his face with my palms, "don't ever say such things—you know I worship the ground you walk on. If I didn't it might be easier. You know you are my first, my last, my only love . . . the very light of my life." The look of utter anguish that crossed his face as he gently lifted my feet back onto the sofa and knelt beside me stilled the words that were in my mouth and brought that unbearable tightness to my throat while I waited in an agony of suspense.

"I have been thinking lately," his voice was firm and measured and I dared hardly listen to what was coming, "especially since you have been so ill . . . that, well . . . perhaps you would like me to send you home again, that maybe I have asked too much in bringing you out to this life . . . you are so young and sweet and I simply can't bear to see you ill or unhappy." Quickly he slipped his arms beneath my shoulders and buried his face in my hair.

For a few seconds I was too stunned to speak, but as the import of what he had said slowly filtered into my consciousness I clung to him in a frenzied, almost distraught silence in which I could find no words to make reply. Send me home again? live apart?

give him up? break up our marriage? Oh, never! never! My senses were reeling and I was at once shocked, humbled, overwhelmed. That any man who loved so truly and so deeply could rise to such a gesture of self-sacrifice with such simplicity and sincerity filled me with awe. Swift and sudden tears which I could not hold back coursed down my cheeks, and I was utterly and completely ashamed. In a poignant soul-searching moment that came upon me unexpectedly I seemed to see myself for the first time. The spoiled, petted, perhaps unwittingly self-centered young girl had suddenly ceased to exist, leaving in her place a woman at last, to whom the challenge of the years that lay ahead could be faced and mastered without fear and without regret. It was almost as if I were born again.

"O my darling," I spoke at last and the dampness of the lashes as I kissed his eyes seemed merely to add more strength to that which was slowly filtering into every corner of my body. "O my darling, promise me you will never, never say that to me again . . . I simply couldn't bear it. We belong, don't we, we always have, we always shall. . . ."

"Through all eternity, my angel." Gently he lay down on the sofa beside me. "It's you I'm thinking of, I only want you to be happy."

"Oh, but I am happy, Georgie," I wept quietly, "terribly happy. I couldn't live without you, and it's been largely my own fault getting fever like this, and to think of you even suggesting sending me home, oh, I feel just an absolute worm, I . . . oh . . ." The words were smothered in sobs.

"There, there," he soothed, "I refuse to listen to such nonsense. You have done wonderfully well and anyone can get malaria out here. The adjustment is hard, I know, and you've tried gallantly to fool me when you've been homesick and confused."

"I could have tried harder," I protested, "and got on with many more things than I have, and I am so bitterly disappointed that I haven't started a baby after all."

"That will come, my dearest." He wiped my face tenderly with his hankie. "The drastic change in your life had its upsetting effect. You mustn't weep any more, I want to see you strong and well. I am so terribly sorry I have been so clumsy."

"You couldn't have done anything better for me, darling, if you'd tried for a million years, though you may not know it."

On and on we talked into the future in the silence and the moonlight which lay all round us like a gentle benediction. As a soft breeze blew across us from the river George picked me up and carried me to our room. Long after he slept at last, comforted, soothed, content in the crook of my arm, I lay wide-eyed and at peace listening to the sighing of the wind in the forest till the first faint streaks of light across the mountains heralded the dawn of a new way of life.

Chapter 16

LISTEN," I said, "I believe I can hear the mail runner's bell." Faintly at first through the darkness and gradually getting nearer, the sound of a tinkling cowbell heralded the arrival of the daily mail. Every morning at dawn the runner left the bungalow with the mailbag and plodded his monotonous way along a jungle path ten miles to the nearest village of Mungpur, where the tiny thatch-roofed post office dealt with all postal matters lightly and inaccurately, to the dissatisfaction of everyone concerned. If we received the Turners' mail by mistake one day, they received David McIntyre's or Carstairs' the next. Eventually all our own letters would find their way into the right bag along with a package for somebody we'd never heard of.

The runner had no objection to the morning trip through the jungle because he was sure of himself in the daylight with his long curved knife and his bow and arrow; but on the homeward run if he had been delayed by his wife's shopping requirements or a long heart-to-heart talk with one of his pals in the village, it was dark before he got back, and the only thing that would scare wild animals from his path was a frenzied and persistent ringing of the little bell which he carried, slipped around one finger.

"What have we tonight, George?" I asked, as the bag was turned upside down on the floor. "Any home mail?"

"Here's one from Ted," said George, leafing through the letters. He scanned the brief note. "He wants us to go down for a weekend."

"Oh, what fun!" I was all ears for I was longing to meet this much-talked-of friend.

"It will have to be fairly soon then." George handed me the letter. "The manufacturing season will soon be on us in full force and then I can't possibly be away."

"What about this next weekend?" I suggested. I was as excited as a child before a party at the prospect of spending a few days in a

doctor's house again, and George had fired my imagination with all he had told us of the skill and charm of his bachelor friend.

The following Friday found us making an all-day trip by river road and rail to Ted's bungalow almost forty-five miles away. I still tired very easily, but George thought the trip would do me good and I was determined not to admit just how tired I was by the time we reached our journey's end.

Our welcome was as warm as the hot afternoon sun had been. "Why, I have hardly been able to wait for this." Ted was beaming as he came down the verandah steps to welcome us. I think it was the faint smell of ether on his clothes as much as his charm of personality that made me feel at home at once. "You must be very tired, young lady." The frank blue-gray eyes, which were never without a twinkle, scanned me with a somewhat comprehensive and slightly medical appraisal to which I was well accustomed, as we sank into comfortable chairs on the verandah.

"No, I'm not at all tired," I lied happily.

"Well, you're going to take it easy here anyhow. Do you think she's up to some guests for dinner tonight, George?"

"I think it would do her a lot of good," George was busily lighting his pipe and shot me a teasing glance over the smoke. "She's almost forgotten what civilization is like!"

During the general conversation I had time to study this man with the clever face and slightly twisted smile. He looked exactly what he was reputed to be—a first-class doctor with a flair for diagnosis. He was certainly a wonderful host and his bungalow amazingly comfortable and well run for a bachelor establishment. I could tell that he was quietly studying me, but at the same time he made me completely at ease, and conveyed the impression that he regarded me as an equal and not in the least as the shy young bride I really was. Somehow he made me feel as if I belonged in the new surroundings and had been accustomed to them for years. He lived in the middle of a group of plantations all easily accessible, and it was the strangest thing to me to find neighbors dropping in at all times as well as for dinner. It was quite evident too that he was immensely popular and there was something very satisfying about the deep and solid friendship that existed between him and George. Each day he took us round with him to visit his different hospitals on the planta-

tions and he was immensely pleased at my thirst for knowledge as to how a jungle practice was run.

On the Monday morning before we left again, George had gone over to visit a neighboring factory on business, and Ted and I sat in the living room over a late breakfast in front of the fire. For some time we talked of this and that as he smoked his innumerable cigarettes and then suddenly he asked me, "Well, what do you think of life in Assam?"

"What do I think of the absence of life in Assam?" I laughed. "It's not like this where we come from."

"No, you happen to have started off in one of the very loneliest places," he smiled his twisted smile, "and you've had rather a rugged start."

"Largely owing to my own fault," I answered quickly and not without a flush of shame that I could not conceal. "I got malaria because I was so pig-headed about wearing these awful mosquito boots. I love pretty shoes, you see." A flicker of a smile spread over his face momentarily.

"I understand," he said, "but boots are essential, they are just part of the inevitable adjustment you have to make to the new life out here. I know it is a big adjustment especially for a city-bred girl," he went on kindly, "but if you will take the country with all its drawbacks to your heart and make it your own, I know you will find much happiness."

"Oh, I'm sure of that," I answered unhesitatingly. "I think it's perfectly beautiful."

"The great secret is to keep busy," he was looking straight at me, and temporarily the finely chiseled features and almost gentle expression of the mouth were serious and determined. "So many of my women patients just won't make any effort and that spells failure, you know. I don't care what you do, but cultivate hobbies. Write poetry, catch butterflies, make patchwork quilts," here the smile which was so enchanting broke over his face again, "anything so long as you turn your mind out and away from the many problems."

"The trouble is I want to do everything at once," I said impulsively, "speak the language, manage the servants, have a garden

and a farm, know all about tea, and above all not fall down on the challenge I have accepted."

"Well, you're on the right track, anyhow." He felt for another cigarette. "It's just a question of time and determination, and always remember there are some situations in life that come to all of us where we have to realize that only we ourselves can help ourselves. People can give advice and help up to a point, but in the final analysis it is only we who can take the necessary steps, put forth the required effort to enable us to make the grade. It's largely a question of grasping the nettle, isn't it?"

"How right you are," I smiled. "You sound rather like Father."

"I sound rather as if I was preaching a sermon," he laughed. "More coffee?" I passed him my cup and he filled it up. "I've done a lot of observing in my time," he bent and placed the coffepot by the fire, "and I have no doubt that you will come through with flying colors." I struggled with a sudden desire to burst into tears, bit my lip tightly and gazed over his head out of the wide bay windows. "And any girl who lightly stands on pythons," quickly he had sensed my emotion and turned it neatly onto a safer level, "is surely born to greatness!"

"Did George tell you about that?" I laughed, deeply grateful for the gentle banter in his voice.

"Well, it's so unusual as to make history," he grinned.

"I suppose you heard about the encounter with the elephants as well then?" I asked.

His eyes twinkled. "I think the whole Province heard about that. You will probably always be known as the bride who lightly pushed a herd of elephants out of her path."

A large white cat that I had not seen before during our visit wandered into the room and jumped up onto my lap. "Oh, what a glorious cat!" I exclaimed delightedly. "Isn't it a darling?" Affectionately it rubbed its head against my arm.

"Do you like cats?" Ted asked.

"I just love them," I answered. "I used to cherish half the strays in London."

"Would you like a couple of her kittens? I want a good home for them."

"I should say I would. Our spaniels will have a wonderful time with them." Ted called the boy and I was able to disentangle sufficient words from the conversation to know that he was telling him to find a basket for the kittens. On a sudden impulse I asked, "What brought you out here? I can picture you so well in a flourishing London practice."

For a few seconds he smoothed back the fair hair that receded slightly from the high forehead. "The man I succeeded here," he spoke quietly and deliberately, "was a friend of my father's. I hadn't been . . . er . . . too well, shall I say, and when he invited me out for a visit I thought the trip would be interesting. After a while, when I saw the need out here among the white and black population I decided to stay on as his partner and when he retired I took over."

"I think that was rather wonderful of you," I said, "it was quite a sacrifice. Tell me, how do you manage for nurses when anyone is seriously ill?" Somehow I felt that I had touched on tender ground and I was anxious to change the subject.

"For a good many years we had no nurses," he smiled. "The doctor nursed his own patients. Many a time I have slept on the floor beside my patient because there was only one bed and one mosquito net. We stayed until the worst was over."

And that's not all by a long shot, I said to myself, for George had often told us of the wonderful emergency operations Ted had performed by the light of flickering lanterns and with only voluntary help, besides the fact that he was called all over the Province as consultant in emergencies. "But with no telephones and no electricity I can't think how you manage in urgent cases," I said.

He shrugged gently. "You just have to manage by sending notes with a runner and using all the extra lamps you can lay your hands on. We are a little better off now that we have a nursing association. A few trained women are resident in Dibrugarh, Tezpur, Gauhati and Shillong always on call, but sometimes they are all out together."

"Then what?" I smiled.

"Then you have to call on your neighbors and hope for the best."

"I wonder what on earth Father would think of such conditions," I said, my mind running back to the perfectly equipped hospitals and endless expert help in difficulties. "I think you must be a tre-

mendous comfort." Indeed, he had already comforted and uplifted me.

"I feel it's a privilege, my dear," he smiled. "I have the greatest respect and admiration for the planter and his wife. It takes more than courage to leave civilization to earn your daily bread, to fight the loneliness and the jungle and the climate. You will find that there is much more to this tea business than just pouring boiling water over it in the pot."

"You are doing the same thing yourself," I pointed out.

"I'm doing it because I want to. I don't have to stay. The planter on the other hand comes out here for various reasons. He has no other profession, and once he has put in a few years things come along that you will see in time, which make it more or less impossible for him to give up and go home."

"Yes, I realize I have much to learn," I replied. "I often wonder if I shall ever get where I want to be."

He stubbed out his cigarette and leaned back in his chair. "Of course you will," he said emphatically, "I'm so glad you have the Turners reasonably near. She is a grand woman to show you the ropes."

"I don't know what I should have done without her already," I laughed. "There is somebody who has arrived with a vengeance."

"When I first came out eleven years ago she was a struggling bride." He got to his feet and held out a hand to me, "so you see there is no cause for despair." Together we walked out onto the verandah. "But you must be a good girl now and take care of yourself, no letting up on the daily quinine pill, and no monkey business over the mosquito boots."

"Oh, I know, I'm thoroughly ashamed." I suddenly felt very small and humble. "I've learnt my lesson the hard way, but all my life I've learnt things the hard way, thanks to my enthusiastic brothers."

"A very good training school, my dear," he laughed heartily. "I can't imagine a better."

When we took our leave after lunch we were laden with flowers, magazines, mango jelly made by Ted's cook, and two howling white kittens in a basket. With a promise of a return visit to us as soon

as possible, Ted waved us out of sight as we drove down the road. Suddenly he seemed a lone and rather pathetic figure outlined against the steps of the bungalow.

Without any specific words having been spoken on the subject I knew that he had sensed the turmoil, the confusion and the fears that had been mine during the previous months, and with infinite tact and understanding he had pointed the way towards a goal my youthful heart was yearning to attain with all the force and determination at my command. I was uplifted mentally and physically and the tiresome fatigue which had plagued me since my illness seemed suddenly to disappear into thin air. I could not wait for the days to pass till I could see as an accomplished fact the many things that I had planned to do and which had lain more or less dormant in my mind during the past confusing and perplexing three months.

I set about at once to start a miniature farm and the making of a garden. George gave me the most wonderful cooperation in every way. In the evenings before dinner he drew up plans for the chicken house which we were to build on a spare piece of hill top behind the kitchen, and which would resemble the chicken house at the Farm. He helped me to sketch pergolas and flower beds, crazily winding paths and a summer house for the garden on the wide piece of lawn that separated us from the dense jungle. I came up with some new ideas for the arrangement of the garden almost every night, very often just as he was dropping off to sleep.

"Your brain is working too fast for me, darling." I could feel the smile that went with the words. He was as happy as he could possibly be at my restored energy and enthusiasm. "You'll have to tell me all over again in the morning." And with the coming of daylight I was up and around, rushing through the chores that I might watch the carpenters busy on the chicken house and the gardeners working as a team with an aged and stately elephant whose duty was to remove by sheer force many large tree stumps that had lain buried just below the level of the grass.

Almost weekly Julie Turner sent me supplies of bulbs and rose cuttings, violet roots and flowering shrubs which I planted as fast as we could get the beds and corners ready. She also suggested that George take me one Sunday morning to the bazaar at Margherita, not only because it was one of the most colorful in India but because

she knew an old man there who kept a large number of chickens, and she was sure that I could get enough young ones from him to make a satisfactory start on my farming project. She also sold us two lovely cows with young calves from her quite large herd so that with our own two I was able to get enough milk to make butter two or three times a week. It was all most exciting. Julie was right about the bazaar at Margherita. Never in my life could I have imagined such a picturesque scene.

The bazaar was held each Sunday morning on the banks of the river. Little thatched stalls ran in rows up and down a large square piece of land. There was space enough between the rows for buyers and "lookers" as well. There were stalls of bright glass jewelry, stalls of brass ware and highly colored bottles of hair oil and medicines, as well as large quantities of vegetables, fruit and fish. Beside each stall stood the vendor, seemingly interested in everything but selling his goods. The more humble vendors had no stalls but squatted on the ground, their wares spread out on pieces of cloth in front of them. Round and round this colorful market place crowds of men, women and children slowly wandered, laughing, talking, scratching, spitting, buying and selling until they had had their fill.

Suddenly I gripped George's arm in excitement. "Look at that strange object over there—what is it?" I was pointing to an almost naked man, with long matted hair to the waist, who appeared to be smeared all over with dust and was sitting on the ground with both arms held high above his head. He was a most fearsome sight.

"He's a Fakir, or holy man." George smiled at my amazement. "He may sit like that for hours, or lie on a bed of nails, or hold his breath indefinitely, to prove the power of mind over matter. They go from place to place begging. Now over there"—he pointed to a stall nearby—"is a Burmese priest. You see the man in the orange-colored robes with the shorn head? He has walked over the mountains from Burma probably on a tour of Buddhist temples. The two very tall men near him in the baggy trousers and short velvet coatees are tribesmen from the other side of India, most likely wanted by the police in their own territory!" The sight of them made me shiver for they had fierce-looking faces, with long beaky noses and unkempt black hair. They carried daggers in their belts and large heavy sticks in their hands.

"What sort of people are those near the fish stall?" I asked as I edged George further away from the tribesmen.

"They are from Bhutan," George smiled, "and don't get too near them for they never wash or change those heavy wool shirts and after a shower of rain when the sun comes out, they smell worse than anything you can imagine!" They were strange-looking people with high Mongolian features and yellow skins and they were not unlike a group of Chinese men and women who were buying fruit at the next stall.

"What a mixture of races," I wondered. "They are like pictures from a book come to life."

"Well, we live right on the borders of Tibet, China, Burma and Bhutan here," George explained, "and there is constant coming and going through Margherita. That's what makes this bazaar so different. We'll come again soon but I think we'd better find the chicken-wallah before he's sold out." We made a most successful deal with a wizened-looking old man, who eyed me with great interest as he stroked his little white beard. He promised to bring me twenty-five of his best young chickens the next day in his own boat and I could have any number I wanted at any time.

The enthusiasm which filled me seemed to have affected the whole household staff. Abdul rather shyly brought me two white ducks the following Sunday when he returned from the bazaar. The cook presented me with a pair of beautifully marked brown and white pigeons which necessitated the immediate construction of a pigeon house, and the news that the Sahib and Mem-sahib were going in for livestock in a big way must have spread pretty rapidly for within two weeks we had further acquired the tiniest baby goat I have ever seen, a tiger cub, and a brown mongrel dog of unknown age and origin.

The goat was the first and certainly the most helpless of the varied assortment of living creatures that came to join our family circle. George brought her home in his arms one morning. "I don't know how you're going to feed the poor little thing," he said as he put her in my hands. "A coolie brought her to the office and said that the mother had been killed by a leopard last night . . . she can't be more than a day or two old."

"I'll make little pads of cotton in muslin and soak them in milk,"

I said as I snuggled the tiny thing against my neck. "I've seen Aunt Helen do that with a lamb."

By the end of a week little Isobel, as she was called, was trotting weakly but persistently after me all round the bungalow, eyed with suspicion and left severely alone by both dogs and cats.

The tiger cub arrived tied up in a piece of cloth in the arms of a naked Naga. I was in the kitchen at the time and neither the cook nor Abdul, let alone myself, could understand a word that he said. But my heart melted at the sight of the forlorn-looking little creature with the most adorable snub-nose and fat heavy paws. I clinched the deal with one of my hats and some empty tins and sent a hurried note to Dr. Chanda to see if he had a baby's bottle. It was quite evident this sturdy infant would require something more solid to suck than cotton wrapped in muslin. George was momentarily taken aback when I lifted the lid from my hastily emptied sewing basket and showed him our newest treasure snugly asleep, his paws over his eyes.

"A tiger cub," he took one paw in his hands. "Where on earth did you get that?" His astonishment was not unmingled with evident interest. "I thought we were going to have a farm not a zoo," he laughed, "he's a regular little Hercules."

"A Naga brought him," I bubbled, "and he's had two eight-ounce bottles of milk already."

"I don't know if we shall be able to keep him for long," George said doubtfully, "they are apt to be vicious as they grow."

But Hercules had other ideas. He proved to be sweeter and more gentle as time went by. The very sight of me preparing his bottle sent him into an absolute frenzy. He would walk round and round in small circles making the most extraordinary little noises rather like a kettle boiling. Then he would jump up onto my lap and snuggle down to suck his bottle, tightly clasped in his paws, with the most seraphic expression in his deep yellow eyes. He and Isobel were inseparable and wherever I went they followed. It was Isobel who became somewhat of a problem. She had two most disconcerting habits. One was nightmares and the other was eating paper. Her nightmares occurred usually after dinner in the evening when a combined jumble of dogs, cats, Isobel and Hercules lay in a tangled heap sleeping quietly by the fireplace. Without warning

Isobel would suddenly let out a penetrating, not to say earsplitting bleat which sent the rest of the animal kingdom into a perfect flat spin. Hastily they scattered in all directions and hid in various corners of the room till they were sure that I had taken Isobel onto my lap and peace was restored. I tried dosing her with bicarbonate of soda and peppermint, but far from quieting her it sent her racing round and round the room like a maniac so that the first dose was also the last. The paper-eating habit seemed impossible to cure. She would empty the wastebasket in double-quick time, snatch tissue paper from any open closet and even stand on her hind legs in the bathroom and consume a whole roll of toilet paper if you didn't watch her. No amount of paper seemed to cause her the slightest discomfort, but the day came, of course, when she overdid things and chose the wrong kind of paper. George had a small private office at the end of the verandah, and poking her nose in this forbidden territory one afternoon and finding nobody home, she had herself a field day. Quietly but methodically she made an end of all the records relating to plantation work for the previous month, together with some important letters from the board of directors as well as some specific instructions about a particular consignment of tea that was waiting shipment to America. The wrath that descended on her head in the shape of a good beating with a rolled-up newspaper delivered by master who came upon the culprit from behind was certainly well deserved. Hearing the commotion from the bedroom I hastened to the spot.

"If this so-and-so little so-and-so ever brings her smelly little carcass inside this door again," George roared, "I'll see that her life comes to an end on the spot." I grabbed Isobel by the collar as George enlightened me on the extent of the damage. I didn't know what to say; I felt terribly guilty for I usually looked to see that the office door was closed. I looked severely at the culprit and shook her by the neck, but she was completely unconcerned. There she was, crammed full of the most important statistics and instructions and heaven knew what else as well, and there was just nothing that could be done about it. I got Abdul to buy me a large bell in the bazaar which I fixed to her collar, and rather like the fog-bound mariner I listened for that bell as I'd never listened for anything before. Master would not speak to her for days and though she

butted his knees affectionately when he was sitting in his chair he would have none of it, he bade her begone in no uncertain terms, lest his emotions get the better of him even at this late date. Abdul suggested that we put some quinine solution on some of the papers in the wastebaskets and sure enough it did the trick. Isobel then turned her attention to the clothesline at the back of the bungalow and a favourite shirt hung mournfully in the breeze, with the result that the rope had to be put higher and higher until a ladder was required to attend to the business in hand.

She was cured almost completely of her nightmares, however, by the soft brown mongrel pup who arrived unannounced one evening in the garden and who, after a furious bout of tail-wagging and melting appeals from his soft brown eyes, sat down beside me and never left us again. Nobody knew where he had come from, with his slight limp and deep-throated bark, but from the very first he made it perfectly clear that he would stand for none of Isobel's dreaming nonsense. At the first sound of her intensive bleating he made one spring from the huddle of animals by the fire and seized her by the collar with a furious growl, shaking her like a rat, his whole fur coat on end. He would most probably have ended her career then and there had not George leapt smartly into the melee and rescued the almost stupefied Isobel from the jaws of death. Privately I thought this was rather a noble gesture in the light of recent calamities. From then on Isobel slept under my feet in the evenings, her nightmares gone forever. Poppy, as the pup came to be called, attached himself very specially to George, and going round the plantation with him every morning was his idea of bliss. He covered endless miles chasing everything in sight, including members of the labor force.

On another occasion his habit of chasing almost cost Poppy his life. He made the mistake of attacking a Naga who came to the bungalow selling honey. The Nagas usually carry big knives which are broad at one end and very sharp. Poppy, considering the almost naked individual anything but a human being, ran at him, and in self-defense the Naga struck wildly, opening the top of the poor Poppy's head from one side to the other, exposing the skull.

We had no veterinarian anywhere near, so I sent a hurried word to Dr. Chanda and asked him to come, and to bring chloroform

plus needles and sutures. We soaked some cotton with chloroform and laid it over Poppy's nose, but in spite of our best efforts he remained entirely unaffected! He showed no signs whatever of slipping into oblivion. It was I who, after a short time, felt the ground coming up from beneath my feet and strange sensations in my head. We had to abandon the chloroform idea as the doctor said he couldn't sew him up without it since the dog might bite him. I said I'd try, but it was obviously too painful, and the cut was so long and deep that we just had to do the best we could and strap it together with adhesive tape.

I made a bandage and tied it round his neck leaving his ears sticking through. Many times daily I dressed the wound, until Poppy was nursed back to life. In a surprisingly short time he was entirely healed, and all set to go again. His patience and fortitude during his ordeal are something I shall always remember.

Chapter 17

IN APRIL the hot and humid weather came in with a rush. Gone were the cold, clear, sparkling mornings and the cosy evenings round the wood fire. We gradually found ourselves living night and day in an atmosphere that, to me, resembled one long, perpetual, exhausting and enervating Turkish bath. The temperatures hovered between 92 and 97 degrees with a humidity of 100 percent, which made the heat at times almost unbearable. The monsoon season which would bring relief was not due until June 15th. About four times a day we had to change our clothes right down to the skin. More than anything I longed for an electric fan and a cool drink. We tried to keep the drinking water cool by putting it in bottles in a basket covered with damp straw which we suspended from the coolest corner of the verandah but it was not very successful. Tepid drinks were the order of the day for about seven or eight months of the year. In the place of electricity the stifling air was kept moving by a punkah, the punkah being a long pole suspended horizontally across the center of the room by ropes attached to rings in the ceiling. Tacked all along the pole was a wide frill of heavy matting, and from the center of the pole another rope ran along to the wall where it disappeared over a pulley down a hole in the floor to the ground beneath; here the rope was gently pulled back and forth, back and forth, by the punkah wallah who sat under the room lost in a perpetual daze engendered by his most monotonous occupation. With the advent of the hot weather came also what was known as the first "flush" of the tea. The days of cultivation, hoeing, pruning, were over for another cold season, and plucking and manufacture took on an aspect of twenty-four hours a day. I had thought during the cold weather that the life of a planter was what one might call "full." Now I gained a greater knowledge of just what that life comprised.

Never again shall I be able to look at a package of tea without a

slight contraction of the heart, for I know how much of a man's very soul goes into the making of those crisp black leaves. I learned day by day with increasing admiration something of the courage, fortitude and singleness of purpose of the small band of men who had forsaken civilization and all it means to earn their daily bread in the faraway jungles. They carried out their duties with a devotion and integrity that surpassed anything that I could have imagined possible. Six thousand miles away from the authorities who employed him, the planter steered an undeviating course along lines laid down by the dictates of his conscience. Month in and month out, alone and unobserved, the unspectacular job that had been undertaken was performed quietly and faithfully to the last little exacting detail. I learned quite quickly some of his weaknesses and failures, chief of which came in the fight against himself. I was neither too young nor too inexperienced to know that this was one of the hardest fights of all. I realized with a growing understanding what Ted had meant when he had said that I should find that there was more to the tea-growing business than pouring hot water over it in the pot.

Our day now began at five A.M. when the sun, a big, red-hot ball of fire, shot rapidly above the mountains, a promise of the scorching day to come. I had to get through my household chores, and the organizing of the work in the garden between the hours of six and eight A.M. George went down to the factory office before breakfast to check in the coolies and arrange the details of the day's work. When he returned to the bungalow he took the temperature readings and measured the rainfall, if any, of the preceding twenty-four hours. After breakfast he went out to the plantation, and a brief lunch hour was all that divided him from the afternoon and evening round. Most of the afternoon was spent in office work which consisted of reports on every branch of plantation work and on the health and well-being of the labor force. Estimates had to be prepared for things that would be required a year ahead, such as machinery parts, supplies, building materials, fertilizers, medicines, paints, pruning knives, stationery and hospital equipment, in fact, stores of all kinds since everything took so long to find its way to Dingajan. He was helped in his office work by Indian clerks or Babus. During the long afternoon hours I spent my time writing,

sewing, reading, surrounded by the household pets who were usually overcome by an intense longing to sleep the trying spell of heat away. Very often in the late afternoon, after tea, I walked with George down the hill to the leaf-weighing sheds where he would look over with David the results of the plucking, after which we sometimes went on the river to cool off a little.

We had barely reached the foot of the hill one afternoon when the sound of angry voices reached our ears. Usually it was a gay, laughing line that waited beside the scales, with jokes flying back and forth amidst a general air of merriment. But as we reached the factory buildings it was evident even to me that something had gone wrong. One man's basket was lying upside down on the ground, he was waving his arms and shouting, and a sea of sullen faces had taken the place of the usual good-natured smiles.

George stiffened perceptibly. "Go on down to the river, will you?" he said almost brusquely to me. "I'll join you as soon as I can." A dreadful sense of tension had suddenly become apparent all round us. Completely bewildered, I was about to take the path to the river when George caught my arm and turned me round. "On second thought I'd rather you went back to the bungalow," he said hurriedly, and pausing a moment to see me on my way he strode off towards the leaf-weighing shed.

Perplexity and uneasiness were added to my impatience to know what it was all about as I waited for George's return. When he relaxed at last under the punkah, he had a deeply worried expression on his face. "I can't quite make out what has come over young David lately," he explained. "He has developed a tendency to nag at the labor and that is one thing they simply will not stand."

"Do you suppose he isn't well?" I asked for I couldn't imagine David nagging anybody.

"He seems to be well enough, but he has given me not a few uneasy moments lately. He is perpetually involved in stupid arguments with the coolies which I find are entirely unnecessary and it creates an extremely difficult situation, for his authority has to be upheld."

"Yes, of course I can see that," I answered as I made way for Isobel to jump up onto my lap. "Was he in difficulties again this evening, then?"

"Very much so." George felt for his pipe. "He had marked down a short weight of leaf for one basket and the owner had thrown it onto the ground and was preparing to stir up a little violence."

"Well, was it wrongly marked down?" I asked with interest. I could never forget the struggles of my early youth to achieve justice.

"That's just what I don't know, of course, for certain, but I have been wondering lately if David isn't drinking a bit on his own in the evenings."

"Oh, don't say that." The very thought of such a possibility made my heart ache, David was such a lovable creature, warm-hearted, gay, loyal, hard-working, and yet, the long evening hours alone . . . what was there to keep a man occupied in the silence and the darkness?

"It's a thought that has crossed my mind," George answered slowly. "It may not be that at all."

"Well, I think it must be an awful fight for a man to keep up any sort of standard," I answered quickly. "What has he got month in, month out, with little or no social life and absolutely no companionship?"

"Well I know it," George answered warmly. "Fortunately for me I have always been a great reader. Every spare moment I had I could take myself off into another world and forget the loneliness."

"That's a wonderful help," I conceded, "but most men aren't great readers; they often just can't get along alone." I couldn't imagine any of my brothers in such a situation as David's. "Do you suppose that it has made him homesick coming here to us," I asked, "or should we perhaps have him up more often?"

"He has been isolated here for three years now," George knocked the ashes from his pipe, "and he still has two years to go before his leave home. I think in the meantime I should leave things as they are, but I may perhaps suggest to the company that he should be transferred to a more populated district for a time."

"That sounds like the best idea," I answered warmly. "He is such a boy, and such a nice one at that."

We spoke very little for the rest of the evening. I could see that George was perplexed and upset. For my part my mind was occupied with a sense of wonder that any one man could handle a job

of such complexity. As far as I could understand, he not only had to be familiar with every phase of planting, plucking, manufacture, and know every machine in the factory inside out, he had to be an expert who could produce a perfect, saleable tea not occasionally but every day of the week. He also had to be judge, jury, counsellor, friend, administrator, keeper of the peace and boss rolled into one and, added to all, so conduct himself that he was above dishonor and without reproach. On the skill and integrity of a man depended the profitable management of the plantation and the well-being of the hundreds who lived and worked on it.

It was all rather sobering, and as if I hadn't enough to think of, when we went to bed thunder started rolling in louder and louder from the Naga hills. I hated thunderstorms from the bottom of my heart. In the previous week or so, it being the season for storms, we had already experienced three, which George had described as minor examples of the power of tropical elements. I had never outgrown my childhood fear of thunder and lightning, instilled, I am sure, by Grandmother. At the slightest sign of lightning she had always ordered every mirror to be covered with a towel. If a meal was in progress the knives had to be placed under the tablecloth, and if we should at other times be engaged in sewing, all needles and scissors were hastily returned to the workbasket. No plausible reason was ever given for these strange goings-on, but we children were informed emphatically that lightning struck the sinner, and by the way Grandmother fixed her eagle eye on me I was convinced that in some way I was almost overdue for death at any moment. Even after the passage of the years, I found it difficult to control my emotions at the sound of thunder even at a distance, and on this night of vague and shadowy disquiet, as the thunder increased I buried my head under the sheets in silent misery. George had dropped off to sleep almost at once and I was determined not to wake him. For a while it seemed as if the storm might pass in another direction and I dozed fitfully, but all of a sudden a tremendous clap of thunder undermined my resolve and I grabbed George's hand in the darkness.

"Oh, wake up, Georgie, get into my bed quickly," I implored. "There is going to be an awful storm."

"Don't be nervous, darling," he answered sleepily as he slipped his arm around me. "It sounds much worse than it is." Hardly were

the words out of his mouth when a flash of purple light that seemed to split the heavens broke all round us. We both jumped simultaneously and our heads met with such force that I felt half stunned. "We've been struck," I yelled loudly, "we've been struck, I know it."

"Don't be silly, darling, we just struck each other," George laughed. "I'll light the lamps and we'll go into the other room till it's over."

I was shaking like a leaf. Outside all hell seemed to have been let loose. Rain lashed across the verandah, blinding lightning streaked the sky and the thunder was so deafening I could hardly hear a word George was saying as he lighted the first lamp. Suddenly there was a sound as if cartloads of brickbats were being hurled against the windows and onto the roof. "Oh, my God," George groaned as he helped me into my dressing gown, "that's hail." In my confusion I only vaguely remembered that he had once told me that hail could ruin the tea bushes if severe enough, but at the moment hail, to me, was preferable to the vicious lightning and thunder. We had scarcely got into the living room when above the fury of the storm there was a sudden sound of gongs clanging and the factory whistle started a furious and continued blast. "That's the fire alarm," hastily George put down the lamp, "something *has* been struck! I must go at once."

"Not in this, George!" I cried. "You *can't* go out in this!"

But George was already flinging on some clothes. In a daze I gripped the back of a chair. The thought of fire had never entered my mind.

"I have to go," George caught my arm. "Be a brave girl. I wouldn't leave you if I could help it."

As he opened the door leading on to the verandah, a violent gust of wind rushed through the room blowing out the lamp and the door slammed to with a crash of falling glass as the panes gave way. Water and hail were pouring across the floor. With each blinding flash of lightning the outline of the mountains was starkly silhouetted against the sky. Sick with fear, and sicker still with myself for being so fearful, I groped my way to the farther window and forced myself to look down towards the factory. An angry red glow was clearly visible among the buildings.

The sound of a door being quietly opened on the back verandah

made my blood run cold. "Who is there?" I cried almost hysterically. "Who is it?"

"It is I, Abdul, Mem-sahib, have no fear," came the quiet answer. Abdul! The faithful Abdul! I almost burst into tears in my relief. I was never more grateful for him in my life than at that moment.

"Oh, what is burning, Abdul?" I asked wildly. "Can you tell me?"

Already he had struck a match and was lighting the lamps. "It is a leaf-house, Mem-sahib. I could see it from the kitchen. Soon now the storm will be over." Stooping, he gathered up a tray from the floor and put it on the table. "I have brought some coffee, Mem-sahib, drink now, and I will clear away the broken glass."

"Oh, thank you, Abdul." Weakly I sank into a chair. "What a storm this is!"

"It is the season for storms." He spoke quietly. "It is the will of Allah, but all is well, Mem-sahib, there is nothing to fear." His calm and assured bearing was just what I needed. I like to remember now that it was Abdul who through the years helped me to overcome my terror, and to face a thunderstorm with calmness, almost with indifference. True to his prophecy on this memorable night, the storm abated with almost as much suddenness as it had occurred and within a short time a beautiful full moon came out from behind the clouds and the only sound audible was the gentle dripping of the raindrops from the eaves of the bungalow. All, too, appeared to be quiet in the buildings at the foot of the hill and within half an hour I heard George's footsteps coming along the path.

I rushed to the door to meet him. "Are you all right, darling?" I asked anxiously for I hardly recognized the grimy man in the rain-soaked clothes.

"All is well," he smiled. "I'm wet and chilly, but fortunately it was only an old leaf-house that took fire."

"Come and have some hot coffee," I begged. My relief at the sight of him, coupled with the ending of the nightmare, was as exhilarating as a strong draught of wine.

"Pour it for me while I change my clothes, I'm soaked to the skin."

"I'm so thankful it wasn't the factory," I said as he returned in dry pyjamas and took the steaming cup from me. I knew enough to realize that that could have stopped production for the season.

"Well, I hated to leave you," he smiled across at me, "but unless

there is somebody there to take control a fire spreads so fast in these flimsy buildings that anything can happen in short order."

Anything can happen is right, I mused to myself as we finally lay down to sleep once more, with half the night already gone. I thought of his remark early next morning when Nero's gentle prodding wakened me to a room full of sunlight and the master already out on the job. She handed me a note from George and I sat up on one elbow and sleepily read the contents which for a moment didn't register very deeply. "I shall be late for breakfast," I read. "Your head gardener murdered his mother-in-law after the storm. I have to go into the case. G."

I wasn't the only one evidently to be affected by a storm! Suddenly, however, the full import of the note hit me squarely between the eyes. My head gardener! My most enthusiastic and reliable supporter in the quickly growing garden which was fast becoming a thing of beauty and an untold joy. He had committed a murder. I could hardly believe it. Now he would be carted off to jail and hung by the neck until he was dead! I leapt out of bed. This just could not be. Something must be done. Oh, why couldn't he have put up with his mother-in-law? I had worked myself into quite a state by the time George came in. His point of view, however, was entirely different evidently, for his chief concern was for its effect on the people.

"These murder cases are an absolute darned nuisance," he said somewhat testily as we ate our breakfast. "It's almost impossible to get at the facts. Any witness who is sufficiently well bribed will testify both for and against the culprit without turning a hair."

"How did it all come about?" I asked. It was obviously no time to let out a wail about my work in the garden.

"Oh, she was an old shrew anyhow," George answered. "Last night they had all been drinking a bit during the storm. She annoyed him and he just hit her over the head with an axe."

"Well, what happens now? Where is Samlal?"

"He's shut up in the isolation ward of the hospital and he'll remain there till the police arrive from the sub-station near the Turners'."

"Will he be executed?" I asked, somewhat anxiously. "I've got such a lot of work for him to do."

"I don't think so," George smiled slowly. "He will probably get off with manslaughter and have to do a year or so in jail. Don't think I have forgotten how useful he is, darling. I'm only too sorry but there is nothing that can be done about it. Added to it all, he is one of a large clan who may decide they don't want to work here any more and I shall lose a lot of excellent pluckers."

"Was there much hail damage?" I asked.

"Fortunately, no," he pushed back his plate. "The storm cut across the far end of the extension and out into the jungle. For that I am extremely thankful. If the bark gets stripped off the bushes it can put them out of bearing for a very long time indeed." We rose from the table and I sped George on his way. But a dull sense of depression remained behind to plague me through the ensuing hours. There seemed to be no boundaries to define the extent to which these men were called upon to give freely of their services day or night. It was impossible to draw any line apparently as to where their call of duty ended. It just went on and on with fresh demands springing up like mushrooms at any given moment. There was no closing of the office or the store at five P.M. and taking the first bus or train home to the little woman. There was no quiet weekend off for puttering around the house. For almost nine months of every year it was seven days a week twenty-four hours a day and that was that.

Chapter 18

EVER SINCE OUR visit to Ted we had kept up a regular and somewhat hilarious correspondence. He was intensely interested in all my doings and had made several attempts to come up and spend a night with us, but each time a serious case had kept him anchored to his post. Now finally he was coming, for it was a case of literally now or not at all for many weeks. The monsoon rains were almost due, and once the rains came, George explained to me, the river was impossible to navigate and we were practically isolated. Our only contact with the outside world, apparently, would be by runner who carried messages with the mail to and fro through the jungle. I was looking forward enormously to seeing Ted again. There was so much I wanted to show him, and talk to him about, and I felt I could talk to him now about a great number of things, for my education had increased considerably since last we had met. He was coming on the following Saturday, and on Friday I was going to spend one of the last days I could with the Turners before our isolation began.

Friday turned out to be one of the hottest days I had ever experienced and Julie persuaded me to delay my return up the river till the very late afternoon. I took the side path from the boat up to the bungalow; though steeper, it was quicker and lay along the cool jungle edge. I was surprised not to find George in the bungalow, especially as a cup of tea was lying untouched on the verandah table. "Where is the Sahib?" I asked Nero who came to meet me, mosquito boots in hand.

"There has been a 'golmal,' Mem-sahib," she replied rather wide-eyed I thought, "he had to go quickly."

A "golmal" meant some sort of trouble. An intense wave of fear ran through me and for some reason or other I instinctively thought of David—why, I had no idea. There had been a kind of uneasy truce between him and the labor force, but I knew that George had

been quietly apprehensive about him in the preceding weeks, and I, myself, had noticed that David was tense and on edge during his weekly visits with us. Quickly I went to the side of the verandah and listened. A murmur of voices reached me from the distance but it was a murmur that was under control, and I breathed a heavy sigh of relief. There seemed to be an unusual amount of subdued chatter going on among the servants on the back verandah. Abdul was away in Margherita bazaar for the day and I called to Goonja to bring some fresh tea. I decided to have a bath and keep my anxiety to myself till George came back.

I had almost finished dressing when I heard his step coming towards the bedroom. I was instantly shocked at the pallor of his face. Though outwardly he appeared calm, I could tell at once that he was greatly disturbed. "Oh, whatever has happened?" I sat down on the side of my bed and motioned him to join me. "Is it something to do with David?"

George looked quickly at me. "What makes you think that?" he asked almost sharply.

"Do you suppose I don't know that you have had something on your mind? . . . Tell me quickly what is the matter."

"We have just escaped a near calamity." George felt in his pocket for his pipe. "I am thankful you were out. I have been expecting some sort of a disturbance—you are right I have been worrying about David—and this afternoon it came to a head. . . . Let's go and sit on the verandah under the punkah." Quickly I got into my dress and followed George. I was entirely unprepared for the tragic revelations that followed. "I wish I didn't have to tell you these things, darling," George looked straight at me as he settled himself beside me on the sofa, "but sooner or later you would be bound to hear and I prefer that you should learn from me." His voice was agitated, almost trembling.

"Haven't I always learned from you?" I queried quickly. "And I'm not a child any more—this is my life now—our life. . . . Tell me quickly all about everything. You know I like to face unpleasant things in a hurry."

"Well, we'll start with David." He slipped his arm round me and put his feet up on a small table in front of him. I sensed that he was making every effort to regain his composure. "We discussed, you

remember, the possibility that he might have been quietly drinking. His relations with the people have steadily deteriorated till finally this afternoon when one of the frequent arguments arose at leaf-weighing, tempers were running high, somebody suddenly threw a large stone at him, and then another, and before you could say knife the mob broke loose. The *Babu** saw David was about to be attacked with hoes and pruning knives and hastily pushed him into the office and locked the doors just in the nick of time. It was the smashing of the windows and the general clamor that ensued which I heard here just as I was going to have tea."

"Oh, how awful," I shuddered. "Does this often happen? What was it all about?"

"It happens very seldom, thank God," George answered quickly, "and there is always some good reason. In this case my later suspicions have been confirmed. David has been dallying with one of the plucking women and he happened to have picked the wrong one. By that I mean that she belongs to a large clan who have resented his attentions, and hence all the trouble." I was too astonished to reply, for somehow such a situation had never entered my head. "I had spoken to David about it quite openly, but he stoutly denied any such entanglement until this afternoon in the office."

"Oh, George . . ." was all I could find to say just then. Suddenly more clearly than ever I realized the loneliness, the isolation, the hunger for companionship which was the lot of these young boys day in, day out, month after month. "But what did you do?" I half whispered. "How did you stop the trouble? Where is David now?"

"The very sight of me was enough to sober the people down." George tapped out his pipe and refilled it. "They know that I won't stand for violence or anything approaching it. I can be as tough as any situation demands and order was soon restored, but it puts me in a difficult position for David was in the wrong. To guard against any such occurrence as we had today is one of the main reasons why the company forbids any dalliance with female members of the labor force."

"Of course, I see that," I answered, "but what happens now? Will poor David get the sack?"

"No, he won't get the sack unless I recommend it, which I shan't.

* Leaf-weighing clerk.

I shall have him transferred to another plantation on grounds of health. He has learned a severe lesson and barely escaped with his life. As a demonstration of authority I shall probably get rid of a few of the ringleaders and the lady in question."

"Get rid of them how?" I asked. I felt I had to know all there was to know. I felt sick and miserable at the whole unhappy chain of events.

"Well, send them back to the part of India they came from," George explained. "Some workers come from Central India, some from the South, some from Bengal, and they are free to go back any way when they want to. Usually they return to their homes every couple of years if they wish and they bring new workers when they return. In this case I shall not have them back."

"Oh, *poor* David." I sighed deeply.

"There is often much personal tragedy and heartbreak in any merger of white and black," George spoke quietly, "and it's on that subject I want to tell you more, much as I hate it. Take Carstairs, for instance." Carstairs! I held my breath for a moment. So there *was* a story about him after all!

"His people are wealthy," George went on, "and when he developed a suspected lung condition, his father sent him on a trip around the world. In Calcutta he met a planter who invited him to stay in Assam, promising him all the big game hunting that his heart desired. He became so fascinated with it all that he applied for a job in tea and got it."

"How long ago was that?" I asked.

"About six or seven years ago," George answered, knocking out his pipe once more and slowly refilling it. "After about two years, however, the loneliness began to get him down. He still had a couple of years or so to go on his agreement . . . and the next thing he knew, he was involved with an Indian beauty. He went home on leave in the course of time and during the summer in England he met and married a girl a good many years younger than himself."

"Why didn't he stay at home then? He had money and every opportunity."

"The girl was so intrigued with his stories of life in Assam that apparently they decided to come back for one more term. Carstairs wrote out to a friend here and asked him to come to terms with his

mistress here on his behalf, and settle her on a piece of rice land of her own. His great mistake was that he didn't tell his wife anything about her."

"She probably wouldn't have married him," I put in.

"That could be," George answered, "but it would have been the wiser thing to do, for sooner or later everything comes out in this small corner of the world. Well, soon after they got back here, Mrs. Carstairs went to Shillong to have a baby. Carstairs and she were devoted to each other and everything seemed perfect. One day soon after her return Mrs. Carstairs was bathing the baby, when there was a commotion at the back of the bungalow. For some reason known only to herself—jealousy, vindictiveness, curiosity, who can say?—Carstairs' discarded mistress appeared and demanded to see Mrs. Carstairs. The servants were powerless to do anything, and Mrs. Carstairs took in the situation at a glance—woman's intuition maybe. Anyhow, when Carstairs came in there was a scene. He had to admit the whole story, and later that evening Mrs. Carstairs shot herself in her bedroom."

"So, *that* was it. How ghastly!" I whispered.

"So that was what?" George queried abruptly.

"Why, I have always been meaning to tell you. I told Julie Turner one day that I thought Carstairs didn't belong here somehow. I have always thought that—and she acted rather strangely and looked at me so searchingly and just said, 'Maybe he doesn't.' I couldn't make it out at all."

"Then I respect Julie even more than ever," George answered warmly. "She had the decency to keep her mouth shut. She did not know if you even knew anything about the color question."

"What happened to the baby?" I inquired anxiously.

"Julie Turner stepped into the breach and took care of him and finally landed him with Carstairs' mother in England when she and Turner went on leave. Mrs. Carstairs' people would have nothing more to do with him."

"Poor Carstairs! I wonder why he doesn't go home and get out of it all?"

"He has never recovered from the shock of the whole tragic affair. He just doesn't seem to have the energy to move away. He did once tell me in an alcoholic moment that he intended to go home when

the boy went to school." George's pipe had gone out, but he lit it again and continued his story. "Then there was the case of Julian Glover . . . that was equally tragic in a different way. Glover became sincerely attached to a very attractive Indian named Sunia. He loved the life out here but he was determined never to bring out a girl from home. He was extravagant and inclined to drink, but Sunia made him give her his money to look after and she kept him off the bottle. She never appeared in public, of course—they never do—but she was certainly the power behind the throne. Well, he had to go on leave to England, and somehow while he was away the rumor got around the bazaar that he had married. It was entirely untrue, as it happened, he had made up his mind never to marry, but Sunia was inconsolable, she wouldn't eat or speak. Just two days before Glover got back, she was found dead in the bamboo grove at his place. It was supposed that she had poisoned herself, and he absolutely went to pieces. Took to drink in the worst way and finally had to be sacked. Nobody ever knew what became of him. Mind you, these are extreme cases, but an entanglement with the country leads into all sorts of morasses."

"I suppose there are children," I said. "What happens to them?" My mind was in a whirl as the tragic stories unfolded.

"That is one of the saddest aspects of the whole question," said George. "It's the final millstone around a man's neck."

"Are there any homes or schools for them?"

"There's a school in Darjeeling, but children of these mixed unions grow up with a stigma that they never really shake off. They are looked down on by both Indian and white. Jobs are found for them on railways and in department stores and offices and some of them are sent on to Australia and New Zealand and other parts of the world to farm and do jobs like that."

"Is the father responsible for their upbringing?"

"Yes, he is, and many a man is kept tied to this country and denied marriage, too, because he cannot afford to keep the children, or pension off the native girl, and start life over with an English bride. It is not that way in every case, but very often a man feels too that he has lost face somehow, and he simply sticks to what he has."

I could find no words to reply. A year ago I would not have been

qualified to grasp the situation. Now it was different. In a few short months I had lived as many years. I saw with new-found clarity the bitter struggle of all lonely men in jungles everywhere. My heart went out in understanding sympathy to our poor, gay, fun-loving David. I wondered how Johnny or Hugh or Edward or Henry would have fared if suddenly transplanted to the back of beyond; they might as easily have fallen a prey to the same temptation. As though George were reading my mind he said very gently, "This sort of thing can happen to anyone when they have no particular aim in view. It could have happened to me as well but I had an objective I hoped one day to achieve."

"Oh, George," I struggled with the tears that were not far away for I knew very well what he meant, "is there anything we can do for David . . . does he have to know that I know?" I could feel the humiliation and misery that David would go through.

"We shall just go on as usual," George answered. "I will arrange for his transfer at once and I shall tell him that you understand that he needs a change to a more civilized center. Nothing more has to be said. The explosion is over, and thank heaven it did not end as it might well have done."

Abdul came in with the mail at that moment and our spirits were further depressed by a telegram from Ted to say that he would be unable to get away. I swallowed my dinner with difficulty, for over and above the shattering revelations that had come to me I had been wrestling with a secret dread for some days that I might be in for another bout of malaria. I had spells of headache and nausea, and though I had faithfully worn my boots and taken daily quinine I was desperately scared and carefully refrained from mentioning my fears to George. I had been counting on Ted's coming to ask him if he could help me avoid further trouble, and now that hope had faded. I lay in bed that night sleepless and forlorn in the sweltering heat. Time and again my thoughts strayed to David in his lonely bungalow, and to all that George had told me. How easy it would be for those to judge, I thought, who knew nothing of jungle life.

Suddenly from down the valley, faintly at first and then louder and ever louder, there came the sound of mighty rushing waters. I strained my ears to listen to the distant muffled sound that bore a strange resemblance to the roar of city traffic. Nearer and nearer

it came, till all at once the heavens seemed to open and all the flood tides in the universe were loosed. George stirred gently from his sleep, raised his head, then sat bolt upright. "The rains," he said sleepily as he groped for my hand in the darkness. "Thank heaven the rains have broken at last."

For two months almost it had rained more or less continually day and night. The foam-crested waters of the river rushed in a torrent past the bungalow, carrying with them a confused mass of tree trunks, drowned cows, large puffs of dirty-looking scum and sometimes even jabbering monkeys taking an involuntary trip on tangles of fallen bamboos. Green mould grew on practically everything in the house. Shoes, books, furniture, hair combs, though cleaned daily, sprouted another fine crop of vegetation before twenty-four hours had passed. The mould was always ahead of you, however early in the morning the cleaning was started. Occasionally for a few hours the sun came out and the downpour ceased, making the humidity almost unbearable. With the brief spells of fine weather the river quieted as if by magic, and we usually seized the opportunity of taking the dugout a short way downstream for George to indulge his never-failing enthusiasm for fishing. I was always delighted to get out as, though I gardened and rode in the lesser downpours and loved it, I had to content myself with many long hours of sewing, knitting, reading and keeping the animals company and freed of leeches which they picked up incessantly.

One bright Sunday morning looked as if we might be set for a whole day of fine weather so that we decided to make an early start down the river. "Do you want to take your rod today?" George asked as he collected the enormous amount of equipment that always seemed to be necessary.

"Oh, I think I'll just be entirely lazy and watch you this time," I smiled. I was not truly a fisherman at heart in spite of all George's efforts to make me one, and moreover, one of the less bright aspects of the pastime was the fact that I had to keep so quiet. At the most critical moments I always had an urgent desire to talk and many were the enormous fish, seemingly, that evaded the bait simply because I was unable to hold my tongue another minute.

"Would you like a book to take along?" George asked, somewhat hopefully I thought.

"Stick one in the basket," I agreed. "I don't suppose I'll read it, though." I was feeling better than I had for quite a spell. The dread of more fever had gradually faded as no fever made itself manifest. The waves of nausea were less and I had been able to make George believe that it was just the heat that caused my flagging appetite and occasional "off" days. I had refrained from telling him of the secret hope that had been taking form in my heart for I knew that he was as anxious as I was that our dream of having a baby should be realized. And it might be only a dream, I reasoned; I didn't know, and there was no one to tell me! But I was determined that not another day should pass without sharing the thought that was filling my mind.

We poled down the river to a small island where we tied the dug-out to a tree. We had to walk across a stretch of sand to reach the backwater, which was concealed by a large clump of jungle, and I settled myself down on my cushions for a happy period of silence. For some time all went well and it looked as if it was going to be a good day. George had several bites right away. I concentrated my attention on the most exquisite sapphire blue and dark brown butterfly that had settled on my foot.

I wanted George to see this butterfly but one glance in his direction told me that he was earnestly engrossed with more important matters for there had just been quite a pull at his line, and a second later, at the worst possible moment, I let out an enormous sneeze. It came so suddenly I could not have checked it. George shot me a look of utter disgust. I was full of apologies and a few moments later he put down his rod and asked me if I would slip back to the boat and bring his pocket-knife which he had left under the seat. I suspected he was just anxious to be rid of me for a little while, but I was only too eager to make amends and off I trotted. As I rounded the little belt of jungle my heart suddenly seemed to stop and I was literally rooted to the spot, for facing me just a few yards distant was a large, fat, sleek-looking tiger. We just stood and looked at each other, my limbs feeling all at once as if they had turned to water. Recovering my powers of locomotion after a few seconds I turned and fled back across the sand, grabbing George's arm with such force I almost pushed him into the water.

"George," I gasped, "a tiger, a tiger! Whatever shall we do?"

"A tiger . . . where?" He was completely calm, just as if I had merely announced that there were ants in the sugar bowl. I pointed towards the boat where I knew the rifle was safely reposing—just in case! "Don't be alarmed, darling." He was gathering up our paraphernalia quite speedily none the less. "It won't touch us, a tiger rarely if ever attacks a human unless it is unable to get food and there are any amount of deer in the jungle. . . . He probably came out to investigate that sneeze."

"Don't be alarmed?" I dithered. "I suppose this sort of thing just goes along with the housekeeping . . . Oh hurry," I urged as I looked hastily over my shoulder. "I shall feel better in midstream."

"He's probably back in the jungle by now," George soothed. "Was he a young one, do you think?"

"I didn't stop to ask his age." I was panting with the fright I did my best to control. "I think I shall die of heart failure one of these days, everything is so unexpected."

All that remained of the tiger were large wet pug marks on the sand. "Quite a big beast," George announced as he glanced at the telltale tracks. "You may not see another for months."

"And that's not too long for me," I answered grimly. "I don't mind if I never see another as long as I live."

"You'll lose any fear you may have," George assured. "They are just as scared of humans as we are of them."

My heart continued to beat loudly nonetheless as we poled back against the stream. It couldn't be too soon for me to reach the safety of our own precincts.

Just as we were tying up the boat at the landing stage I caught sight of another dugout rounding the bend in the river.

"Look, George," I said, "there's a boat. Whoever could it be?"

He turned and shaded his eyes with his hand. "I can't see," he answered, "but probably only fishermen on their way to Margherita."

"Why, no, I'm sure there is somebody with a topee on. . . ."

The boat came nearer and nearer and a white-clad figure stood up and started to wave violently in our direction.

"I believe it's Ted!" George was waving back.

"Oh, how marvelous," I said. "But it can't possibly be."

"It is, though," George answered, and both together we hulloed

and shouted. In a very few moments the boat pulled up alongside, and Ted leapt out, the broadest grin all over his face.

"Why, this is wonderful," I laughed. "I can't believe it."

He looked happy and full of fun. "Fooled you this time, didn't I? Are you just going out?"

"No, we've just come in," George smiled, and added somewhat hurriedly, "did you see anything of a tiger on your way?"

"No, thank goodness, I was sober last night," he laughed. "I certainly did not see one."

"Jokes aside," I put in hurriedly, "I met one almost nose to nose and I haven't recovered yet." Graphically I told him all about it. He was looking at me very intently and I wondered what he was thinking.

"Well, you certainly see life, my dear," he said. "I'm afraid you won't think much of the livestock I have brought you after all that."

The boatman handed out a wicker cage and a small cardboard box. In the cage was a beautiful dark brown bird with a red beak. It started to whistle at once.

"It's evidently pleased to see you," Ted smiled. "It's a talking hill mynah. I thought you might like it. Wait till you hear it clearing its throat, oriental style!" he chuckled, looking at George. "They are wonderful mimics, these birds."

"What's in the box?" I asked, peeking into a small carton.

"Two white rabbits. One of my Indian doctors gave them to me and I haven't time to look after rabbits."

George seemed a little less enthusiastic than I could have wished over these new additions to our animal world, but he bore what misgivings he may have felt in noble silence.

"How did you manage to get a boat up?" George asked, as we started for the bungalow. "You've no idea how amazed we are to have company in the rainy season."

"Turner sent for me yesterday," Ted explained. "They had an accident in the factory and wanted some help—nothing too bad, I am glad to say. I thought that as long as I was so close by I'd call on you. Turner got hold of a fisherman's boat for me near the post office, and here I am."

"Well, we *are* delighted," I said. "Have you been very busy?"

"Oh, I have, and I'm really quite tired. Just let me lean back and listen to the story of your lives for the next few hours—that is, after I have seen all there is to see around these parts."

Ted was enchanted with the garden, a riot of zinnias, cosmos and balsams, all of which grew wonderfully in the rainy season. We visited the cows, the horses, the very elaborate hen houses and pigeon houses. He thought I had accomplished wonders, which sent a warm little thrill of satisfaction through me. I was so thankful he had come. Perhaps I should have a chance to talk to him alone again. There was so much I wanted to get out of my system. As the men settled themselves on the verandah with their drinks, little Hercules, who wasn't so little any more, leapt up onto Ted's lap and started to lap his mug of beer. Beer was his passion in life ever since he had got a taste from an overturned glass in his infancy. "Let him finish it, my dear," Ted laughed delightedly. "I should like to study the effects of beer on a tiger cub . . . it's a new one on me."

"It doesn't seem to affect him in the slightest," George said. "He can drink a great deal more than Monica without turning a hair."

"Well, considering I can't drink at all without becoming silly, that's no criterion," I laughed. "Anyway, I'm going to see the cook and have a bath while you two talk." And I'm going to dress for dinner in one of my elegant trousseau dresses that I have hardly worn, I said to myself as I arranged a different menu and had a hasty glance into the guest room to see that Isobel hadn't been sleeping on one of the beds—a favorite spot of hers.

Eagerly I shook the tissue paper from a soft flowered chiffon dress that I had worn only twice. It had been such an exciting day already my mind was still in a whirl, but even so I was not prepared for the shock that awaited me when, after a hurried bath, I dressed and slipped the frock over my head, mussing up my hair in my hurry to see myself once more in one of my prime favorites. For many weeks all our best clothes had had to be stowed away from the damp in a large, tin-lined, airtight trunk. Struggle as I would, however, I could not make the hooks meet around my waist by a good inch and a half. I was completely nonplussed and at that moment George walked in, greeting my somewhat crestfallen appearance with a quick smile.

"What's the matter, darling?" he asked as he sat down on the low seat in front of my dressing table. "You look lovely in that dress. I haven't seen it for ages."

"But George," I was tugging away at the waist, "look . . . I can't fasten it. . . ."

For a long moment we looked at each other in the mirror, then George pulled me down beside him and slipped his arm round my waist.

"I'm going to get Ted to come and give you a check-up. Isn't it fortunate that he is here?"

"It's been such a day I don't know whether I'm on my head or my heels." I searched for my powder puff and vigorously dabbed at my face. "It may not be," I went on miserably, "and he'll think I'm such a goat not knowing."

"He will think nothing of the sort." George walked towards the door. "I'm going to ask him to come at once."

I could hear muffled conversation going on in the guest room as I slipped into a robe, and a few seconds later Ted rapped at the door and walked in. "Well," the same old half smile was on his face "keeping things from me are you? I have been wondering when you were going to tell me."

"Oh Ted, I have been longing to talk to you," and for the next few moments a cascade of pent-up emotions fell from my lips. It was a varied assortment of fears, shocks, worry over David, riots, thunderstorms, Carstairs, malaria. Ted listened quietly as he made his examination.

"I understand perfectly, my dear," he soothed, "I am only too happy to tell you that you will be a proud mother before five months have passed." He straightened up and sat down on my bed. "Now I want you to take it easy. No more riding and over-exertion in the gardening line, daily walks short of fatigue and lots of sleep." He looked as elated and pleased as if it were to be his impending happiness. Once again my heart contracted as I looked at his clever, kindly face. He was lonely, I was sure, with a depth and intensity that he would never reveal.

"You don't think I shall have something with stripes and a long tail and python marks or anything do you?" I laughed. "I have had so many frights."

"Of course you won't," he chuckled quietly. "You of all people to even think of such old wives' tales! I want you to rest for a while now till dinnertime and I'll talk to George. We must think up some plan of campaign, you cannot have a baby here, you know."

I hardly knew what I knew as I tried to calm the tumult that was going on inside me. To think that I was really going to have a baby! I could hardly wait to have a telegram sent off to the family. Then suddenly my heart sank at the thought of them being so far away, and a further panic gripped me when I began to realize that I was in the depths of the jungle far away from any bright and shining hospital. Suppose anything should go wrong. Whatever should we do? But it must not, it would not. Dozens of women had babies in the jungles of the world. At least lots of them if not dozens. Whatever happened, I reasoned, I had to go through it now. Nothing could stop that.

A sudden wave of shyness gripped me as I thought of George in the light of this new relationship. I wondered what I should say, what he would say, and then the door opened and he came in quietly and put his arms around me and not a single word passed between us.

"Now, my dear," Ted said to me as we settled ourselves on the verandah after dinner, he comfortably relaxed, on a chaise longue, I curled on the sofa beside George, "I have been telling George that I think the best plan will be for you to have your baby in my bungalow. I will arrange for a nurse to come in the day you come to me, and then you won't be so far away from George and he can come over and see you as often as possible. It's better than going either to Calcutta or Shillong which are the only alternatives. How does that arrangement strike you?"

"Why, I think that's wonderful, Ted," I answered warmly, "but won't that turn your place upside down?"

"Not a bit," Ted laughed. "I love company and many's the time I've had patients with me for weeks on end."

I could well imagine that. It was typical of Ted to give his shirt to anyone and never count the cost.

"I can't tell you what it would mean to me, Ted," George spoke quietly, "it's a tremendous load off my mind."

"Well, that's settled then." He blew a cloud of smoke up into the air. "I shall enjoy it as much as anyone."

A watery moon came out from behind the clouds, filling the verandah with a soft yellow light. I hardly noticed what the men discussed of this and that before we finally went to bed. I was lost in a dream, but not too deep a dream to realize that now more than ever I must be possessed of all the determination of which I was capable. I thought of all the difficulties that had already been overcome; it was only a few days since I had killed a snake unaided, that was lurking in the bathroom. I could pull leeches off my ankles without turning a hair. Even the jungle silence was beginning to yield sounds that before had been inaudible to my frightened senses. Pleasant sounds they were, of birds in the deep distance and barking deer calling to one another in the still of the evening. George had taught me to tell the time by the sun, and to know my exact position when we were riding out on the plantation. The stars had taken on a new meaning as I had learned their different positions in the inky skies. I would refuse to dwell on the possibility of anything going wrong in this new and greatest challenge. All must—all *would* be well.

Chapter 19

THE WEEKS slipped by with amazing speed as I knitted and sewed and dreamed and sewed some more. Mother sent a series of the most exciting parcels containing delicious baby garments, soft fine Scottish shawls, and delicate crib sheets and blankets. She had also sent pattern books, soft knitting wools and yards of lovely laces and ribbons. Father wrote me wonderfully comforting letters full of encouragement and sound advice. I longed for them both desperately at times. They were unselfish and mature enough to conceal their feelings about my being so far away. They spoke only of us and our happiness.

The rains ended at last and the first faint coolness of the oncoming cold weather made the mornings and evenings a thing of absolute joy. I indulged in leisurely seed-planting for the new season, seated comfortably on a cushion in front of the seed beds and surrounded as always by our interested animal world. Hercules received many a gentle cuff for he always wanted to sit right on the bed I was planting. Rebuffed, he would make his peculiar growling noises inside and walk round and round for a while in small circles, grumbling to himself till his feelings of frustration finally left him and he became a nuisance to the cats, dogs and Isobel, bumping his squat little head against their middles in the hope of finding somebody willing to engage in a rough-and-tumble on the lawn.

I had planted well on towards dusk one evening and had decided to call it a day and go in search of George whose whistle I had heard on the verandah a few minutes previously. I had answered, but I was not as speedy as usual in my movements and by the time I reached the living room he was examining the mail. I could tell at a glance that he was upset about something he was reading.

"What's the matter?" I settled my cumbersome body comfortably in my chair. "Any complaints from the office?"

Complaints from the office would have been a mere fleabite com-

pared with the bombshell that was to be exploded in my lap the next moment.

"No, darling." He hesitated and I could see that he was searching for words with which to convey some unpleasant news. He got up from his chair with a letter in his hand and came over to me. "Now try not to be upset." He ran his hand over my hair as he spoke.

"Out with it, Georgie," I answered quickly. "Let me grasp the nettle quickly as Ted once said to me, whatever it is."

"It is from Ted." He handed me the note. "It has just come by special runner. It will mean a change of plans, I'm afraid."

"A change of plans?" My heart missed a beat as I looked up at him, then at the note. I read with quickening breath.

My dear Both,

I cannot begin to tell you how badly I feel at what I have to write, especially at this late hour. I received a cable this morning informing me of my mother's death and of the necessity of my making a flying trip home in connection with legal affairs. Needless to say, I would not go if it were not imperative.

Monica, my dear, I know that you will take this in your stride, hard as the alternative is, for it means that you will have to go to Calcutta or Shillong, and I suggest the latter place on account of the shorter journey and the fact that you have little time in hand. I do most earnestly urge you to make arrangements to leave without delay. There isn't anything in the way of a maternity hospital in Shillong but there is a small nursing home and I know that Dr. Simpson is a first-class man. Believe me, I am more than distressed at having to let you down like this and I can only hope you will both understand and forgive. I expect to be back within the next few weeks but not soon enough for your baby. Please keep me informed at the address below. My best love and may the good Lord give you a quick and easy delivery.

Ted

We looked at each other in amazement. I could hardly take in the full meaning of the letter all at once. "But, George!" Suddenly the horrible realization began to dawn and a large and uncomfortable lump was rising in my throat. "I can't go away up there . . . by myself . . . and be alone through it all. . . . Why, I just can't."

George was obviously upset.

"It's crushing news, darling, I know." He came and sat on the edge of my chair. "But we must face it. There is no alternative."

"Oh, let me stay here with you," I implored. "Dr. Chanda can take care of me."

"It's out of the question." George said with determination as he got up and started to pace the floor. "I couldn't possibly agree to that. Supposing we needed help?"

"But what about Julie," I protested, "what did she do—and lots of other women in jungles as well?"

"Both Julie's children were born at home in Scotland," George answered firmly, "and when she had a premature affair after her malaria Ted was with her."

"Oh, dear," I exclaimed in anguish, "whatever shall I do?" I felt suddenly swamped as if by a heavy wave in a rough sea; to have to go away to a strange place and be alone through the ordeal of having a baby was more than I felt I could take. I was trapped and there was no way out.

"Let's get a move on at once," George said quickly. "It's always best to face these things immediately, and in this case we have no time to waste. I know you'll be a brave girl for my sake and that will help me enormously." His voice was almost pleading and I knew very well what he too was going through, but I never felt less brave in my life. I was completely unnerved.

"When must I go?" I asked weakly, struggling with a lot of hot sand behind my eyelids and a feeling that if there was any way out I wouldn't have a baby at all, not in the circumstances anyhow.

"I'll wire the nursing home at once," George answered, "and then we must leave tomorrow. I shall just have to take you up to Shillong and return immediately. If David were here it would be different but I can't stay away from the place and leave a young greenhorn like Bailey in charge."

"Oh, George, I can't go," I wept at last. "I can't face it alone. I simply can't."

"Yes, you can," he answered almost bluntly in the face of his own distress. "And it won't be for long." Gently he put his arms round me. "I'll get you back the moment you can travel . . . and think what a thrill it will be to come home with the baby."

I couldn't begin to think at all, but there was apparently no alternative. Within four days I was waving goodbye to George from the porch of a small white building in the pine-clad hills of Shil-

long, five thousand feet high and almost three hundred miles away from my own dear and familiar surroundings.

The nursing home was in charge of a hard-faced spinster by the name of Miss Savage. She treated me in a coldly hostile sort of fashion which gave me the feeling that I had committed some kind of crime. The house had just three rooms which led one into another and were separated only by folding doors, so that every sound could be heard from one room to another. I was in the middle room. On my left lay a man dying of pernicious anemia, and on my right was a woman who was desperately ill after surgery. I lay shaking in my bed at night with fear and loneliness, listening to their groans. Fortunately for my sanity, I didn't have long to wait. When the great day dawned a week after my arrival, my courage sank. If only my father were with me! I knew how much he had eased these situations for countless other women, and I wanted somebody I knew and loved near me. Anything or anybody but the uncompromising Miss Savage.

I awakened around midnight with the first pains. I put on my dressing gown and paced the floor. Between the pains I opened the drawers of the chest and chose the little garments I wanted my baby to wear, tears of misery and fear coursing down my cheeks. Towards dawn I could bear it no longer and wakened the only help on which I could call, an elderly and somewhat deaf but kind night nurse who promptly roused Miss Savage. She hovered in and out of the room in detached aloofness, returning each time with even more frightening-looking apparatus including long curved needles which made my blood run cold as I looked hastily away. As the time dragged on and I seemed to be sinking farther and farther into a fiery furnace of unbelievable suffering, I asked her if she couldn't do anything for me.

"Well," she replied archly, "you must remember you got yourself into this and you have to get yourself out of it. . . . Now take a deep breath and bear down hard, Doctor will be here in a little while—but he isn't keen on giving anaesthetics if it can be avoided."

The doctor's arrival was apparently no indication that I was to get any relief. I begged him for some chloroform or that he would hit me over the head. "In a little while maybe," he answered not unkindly while he made a slight show of preparing something that

looked like a dog's muzzle, which I prayed he would soon clamp over my face. "I don't want to give you anything if we can avoid it." Quietly he fiddled with gauze and the muzzle. Suddenly, just as he had come to my bedside and bent over me once more, I had such an excruciating pain I let out a roar that must have been heard all over Shillong, and the next moment as I seemed to be slipping into oblivion I heard a baby crying, and the doctor was patting me encouragingly and telling me I had a magnificent daughter with a "chest on her like a prize-fighter," and soon she was in my arms and I was laughing and crying at the same time and Miss Savage was looking as blank and unconcerned as ever as she glanced at the clock and wrote something down on a piece of paper.

"Why, she's got her eyes open," I said to the doctor, who was human enough to appear genuinely moved and delighted at this new-old miracle which had suddenly turned my suffering into the most indescribable joy.

"What did you expect?" He was laughing heartily. "Did you think she would be blind for the first ten days?"

"Oh, I don't know what I expected," I answered excitedly, "but isn't she beautiful—she looks about a month old."

"The most beautiful baby in the world," he said kindly. "Now, what shall I say in the telegrams I'm sure you want to send? I'll drop them at the post office on my way back to lunch." All remembrance of the preceding nightmare hours had miraculously faded as together we concocted suitable messages to send to George and the family.

I could hardly wait for the three weeks to pass, on which the doctor firmly insisted before I should be allowed to take the baby back to her jungle home. I was longing for George to see her. I wondered how he would look holding a baby and whether he would feel awkward or embarrassed. But he held her as if he'd been holding babies all his life, and he was totally unable to conceal his pride and joy as he walked up and down my room the evening of his arrival to take me back, the baby comfortably asleep in his arms. We received rapturous welcome from the staff on our arrival home. The excited servants flocked round to see the "Missy-baba." Privately, no doubt, they would have preferred a boy, since girls don't excite much enthusiasm in the Orient, and some castes even adopt

a boy if they have none, as it is their custom that a son must be present to close his father's eyes at death. Not only the servants but the animals expressed their joy at seeing us, though they were frankly nonplussed when first they heard the baby cry and raced round the bungalow like mad things seeking the cause of the strange and unaccountable sound. We used to bathe her in the evenings in front of the living room fire and George took a tremendous interest in every detail of her routine.

"She is exactly like you," I said a few days after my return as George sat beside the tub idly squeezing water over her with the sponge.

"I can't see it, I must say," he laughed, though I think he was secretly flattered at the very suggestion.

We had the worst time after dinner in the evenings, comfortably seated on the sofa by the fire, trying to come to some conclusion as to what she should be called. We could never find names that we both really liked and finally compromised on choosing Elizabeth Mary, which were the names of our own mothers.

We had several delighted cables from the family and two from Ted. He had taken time to visit the family and they had fallen completely in love with him. "Mark my words," Mother had written, "there is some reason why that nice man isn't married." I was so happy myself I almost burst. I spent long hours in the day lying out in the garden in the warm sunshine, the perambulator beside me. I was so thankful to be safely back and to see the tired, anxious little lines gradually fading from George's face. Strange it is, I thought to myself, we can always remember the big days in life, but the little, dear, everyday days, how we let them slip through our grasp without the recognition that is their due.

About three weeks after my return I was suddenly afflicted with a very severe toothache. There was nothing that could be done about it until a touring dentist came around some time during the cold weather, so I had to grin and bear it. After I had spent a sleepless night and a miserable day, George announced in the evening that he would let me rest and himself bathe the baby.

"I can do it perfectly well," he said, at my open astonishment. "I saw you bathed dozens of times. Just lie on the sofa and keep quiet."

This, I thought to myself, I simply must see! I lay back on the

cushions and endeavored to keep a straight face, agreeing first, of course, that he could do it perfectly well. He solemnly tied first the mackintosh apron and then the flannel one round his waist, puffing meantime at his beloved pipe. He tested the water with his elbow and looked to see that everything was at hand for the ritual, and then, putting his pipe down on the table, he gently picked the baby up from her crib.

"Now, madam," he addressed her, "just come with me and see what Daddy can do for you."

Ah! Just see, baby dear, I thought! I was almost overcome with a desire to laugh out loud.

Slowly and with all the care imaginable, he managed to get the wriggling bundle unclothed, accompanied by many strange noises on his part, and much clucking of the tongue. With really amazing skill he soaped her fat body all over, as she squirmed and writhed on his lap. This accomplished, he picked her up very gingerly, and, just as he was lowering her into the small tub in front of him, she slithered out of his grasp headlong into the water. I leaped from the sofa with a yell—my toothache cured. George meantime had grabbed her by one leg, and spluttering and coughing, she was retrieved from a watery grave. Poor Daddy was simply aghast.

"Why, it's worse than handling a darned eel!" he said faintly.

After the first shock was over, I could not help laughing until the tears ran down my face.

"Never mind, darling," I said, as I rolled the now screaming infant in a towel. "She is none the worse, and it has completely taken away my toothache, anyhow."

"I can't imagine what happened," he said humbly. "I was holding onto her for all I was worth."

"I expect this is what is known as bringing up a family," I laughed again. "Anyway, it was well worth seeing."

We were both utterly stupid over the baby. I often remarked to George that it was a blessing for the outside world that we lived in seclusion, for anyone would have thought that ours was the only baby in the world that was sweet and adorable and lovely to look at. She was strong and healthy, and yet often when she was peacefully asleep I leaned anxiously over her crib to make sure that she was really still alive! She spent most of her time during the lovely

cold weather days out in the garden surrounded by the animals who formed a perpetual bodyguard. It seemed no time at all until she could sit up, and then take her first staggering steps which always led to the flower beds where she gripped a handful of blossoms and pulled them ruthlessly from their stalks. I was immensely proud of my garden, and even Julia complimented me on it each time she visited us. It looked just as I had dreamed, with giant hollyhocks, sweet peas, mignonette, snapdragons, poppies, stocks, roses and violets filling the air with a perpetual perfume. The bird bath was never free of visitors and Elizabeth made fruitless efforts to catch them in her small hands. She had the most delicious laugh. It was a deep warm laugh that started as a gurgle and carried you along with it until you found that you were laughing too, in spite of yourself. Since she was the only white baby within a radius of many miles she was the pet of the district. We took her sometimes to the Turners' though I often felt that it must make Julie's heart ache with her own so far away, but she and Sam doted on the child and spoiled her dreadfully. Sam carried her around showing her all the animal heads of his trophies on the walls. Their open jaws did not seem to frighten her in the least. She appeared to think they were hungry and spent many happy moments helping Sam feed them pieces of cake and other tidbits.

Sam always maintained that her gay and happy disposition was the result of her having been christened out of a beer mug! The ceremony had been performed when the visiting minister was spending a few days at the Turners' during his cold weather tour of the plantations. Julie had whipped up quite a large party for the occasion and had told Sam to see that there was a suitable receptacle of warmed water on the flower-banked table at the end of the long living room. Ted, who was godfather, and who had the baby in his arms as Sam marched into the assembled company solemnly bearing the beer mug, let out an unrestrained guffaw, and the minister, looking slightly taken aback for the fraction of a second, shot Ted a withering look and decided to proceed with the service, the shortcomings of his flock notwithstanding.

It was always after I had been at the Turners, where all they had of their children were their photographs and their little weekly letters, that I had to fight the realization that one day we, too, would

have to part with our child to be educated away from the jungle, and that I should be one of the mothers who saw her child only once every several years. It made my heart sink to think of it. But that time was still far away, I always told myself. George would not even discuss it. We were living at the moment in the wonderful anticipation of our first leave home to the family, and we could hardly wait for the six months that were left before we could take them the child they were so longing to see.

Chapter 20

FATHER MET US at the station with the car and we clung together as if we were never going to part! George, with the baby in his arms, stood smiling beside us and at last Father loosed me and turned towards him. "Oh, what a glorious child," he exclaimed excitedly as he patted George's back and then his arm, "and she is the living image of you, George." His face was radiant. "Will you come to Grandpa, darling?" Father held out his arms to Elizabeth who had been solemnly eyeing him all the time, and to Father's intense delight she held out her arms in return and clasped them tightly round his neck. Father smothered her with kisses to hide his emotion and as George went off to collect the lighter luggage Father and I sat down on a bench and he grasped my hand. A strange feeling of unreality gripped me and I could find no words to express the joy that was in my heart. "Grannie is waiting for you in the house," he laughed as his eyes scrutinized my face. "She felt she wanted to meet you where she parted with you, on home ground. . . . But you're looking wonderful, child, a little tired maybe."

Grannie! Grandpa! My mind was in a perfect whirl. It all seemed so impossible all of a sudden. Surely I was just a little girl again returning from school! And yet here I was on the very same station with my own baby, and Father was a grandpapa, and Grannie was Mother, who was waiting for me in the dear familiar house. "Oh, Father, darling, I just can't tell you what I feel, it's all so heavenly and so mixed up. . . ."

George appeared at last, and the confusion and the crowds on the station only added to my sense of unreality. I had become so accustomed to the quiet of the jungle that I felt as if I should never be able to walk alone in the busy, bustling streets again. Elizabeth was perfectly content to nuzzle up to Father in the car and suck her thumb. Tenderly he arranged her shawl around her. As he and George chatted I strained my eyes to catch every detail of the

familiar surroundings. Nothing seemed to have changed at all. The same shops, the same buildings, the same churches, and theatres, and flower women with their gay baskets in Piccadilly Circus. Everything was the same; it was I who had changed, had grown up and acquired a baby and endowed my family with the strange status of grandparents and uncles. George was watching me with quiet and undisguised delight, and just as we neared the turning leading towards the house Father handed Elizabeth back to me.

"You give her to your mother, I know she will be waiting on the doorstep," and there she was as we drew up, beautiful as ever in a soft brown crepe dress, her face alight with happiness. I almost stumbled in my haste to race up the steps into her arms. She gathered both Elizabeth and me to her and so tightly did she hold us that the baby began to struggle and squirm—I think we had almost forgotten about her just for the moment. In a perfect dream I followed Mother into the house. Everywhere was a mass of flowers and softly smelling wood smoke, for though it was the end of May there was a cold wind and Mother was never one to falter in the matter of comfort for her family. "I have the recreation room ready for you, darling," she said excitedly. "We thought it would be the largest and most suitable room for you and George and this adorable bundle."

We stopped to look in every corner while memory after memory came flooding into my mind. It seemed as if Elizabeth must somehow belong to Mother and Father. The recreation room had been redecorated with a beautiful nursery paper. Beside our most comfortable-looking bed was a white and blue crib. On the pillow stood a soft woolly lamb. There were soft rugs on the floor and I instantly recognized the high chair that we had all used in our infancy.

"She is a remarkably good baby, Monica," Mother said "and isn't she exactly like George?" At that moment Father and George joined us. George came and put his arm round me while Father went down on his knees beside Mother who had Elizabeth on her lap in the old rocking chair. He took out his watch and dangled it before her to her great delight.

"I'm so bemused," I laughed, "I feel that in a moment everything will change and George will be shepherding me out of this room away from the boys."

"Don't you think this young lady should have a nap?" Father

got up from his knees as he spoke, looking slightly professional all of a sudden. "She is taking everything in," he smiled, "and Grannie and I must restrain ourselves." Tenderly he bent and kissed Mother. "How do you think the old folks are looking?" he laughed.

"I think you are both looking wonderful," I answered warmly. "You haven't changed one atom."

Father had to leave us to make his rounds but he promised to come home early, and the day passed in a dream as Mother and George and I talked and unpacked and talked some more while Elizabeth slept serenely in her bright new crib.

The arrival of the boys one by one in the evening was nothing short of riotous. Their combined good looks and added maturity almost swept me off my feet. Literally I *was* swept off my feet for they picked me up in their arms, threw me from one to the other like a shuttlecock, examined my complexion, my hair, my figure, approved once again the shape of my legs and the color of my eyes. They kept Elizabeth out of bed to an ungodly hour while they in turn dandled her, threw her up in the air, made animal noises and horrible faces, to all of which she responded with that delicious, gurgling laugh.

"Couldn't have produced a better infant myself," Edward announced proudly as he fed her with some ice cream that he had brought home.

"I'll trade her for my microscope if you like when you go back," said Hugh laughing.

"Like fun you will," I cuffed his head, "and if you lions will please stop spoiling her for today I'd like her to go to bed."

Once she was safely asleep I returned to the living room and curled myself up on the floor, my head on Father's lap. I was too happy to talk. I just listened, as the years seemed to roll back, and we were once more the united family discussing this and that as in the days of long ago. As the hours passed, I began to realize as I listened that time had wrought some changes not only in me but in the others as well. Father was telling George that Mother had at last persuaded him to agree to giving up his work. He tired too easily and found that the practice had grown too big for him. They had looked over some small houses on the coast and were in the process of taking over one of them the following month, so that we

could all be by the sea during the short time that George and I were to be home. Mother was plagued, it appeared, with spells of rheumatism and Father wanted her to have an easier life.

When I had had time to look at them more closely I could see that both Mother and Father were a little aged in outward appearance though totally unchanged in every other way. The first few weeks slipped by with frightening speed for there was so much to do in getting ready for the move which took place smoothly enough on the surface but which tore all our hearts to a most uncomfortable degree. It was decided that the boys, who were all working in London, would continue to occupy the house under the care of a housekeeper, at least until a final decision was made as to whether or not the place should be sold or rented.

The fact that Father was at last going to be near sea and country after all the years in a city which he loathed and had suffered so uncomplainingly meant more to me than anything else. He and Elizabeth delighted so in each other, and the first weeks of adjustment were eased considerably for him as he devoted his time to building sand castles, paddling in the ocean and walking in the woods which backed up gently onto the rolling south downs not far from the new house.

When only about a month remained of our time at home, George and I had to tear ourselves away from the country and sea and seriously consider our shopping. Just as we were coming out from lunch in the grill room of the Berkeley Hotel after a hectic morning's shopping we bumped into a man who, as we turned to apologize, suddenly stopped, as did George. The next moment they were shaking each other enthusiastically by the hand and patting each other on the back, and I found myself looking into a pair of the greenest eyes I had ever seen, which suited to perfection the deep auburn hair and pale skin of the tall smiling stranger.

"Monica, this is Bob Rawlings," George was saying. "You'll remember my having told you we served our apprenticeship together on the same plantation."

"Why, of course I do," I laughed, "and you had a pet monkey that lived on beer if I've heard the story correctly."

"Please don't hold that against me." Bob grinned as we shook hands. "That was in the days of long ago. And it's the darndest

thing meeting you like this because I've just come from the office and when I heard George was on leave too I got your address. I was going to write and ask you if I could drive down some weekend and bring my fiancée."

Being as romantic as any other woman I was immediately hot on the trail for all the details. I thought George's friend a charming person, frank and friendly and extremely good-looking. "Is your fiancée with you, Mr. Rawlings?" I asked with the greatest interest.

"She is thick in the midst of trousseau shopping," he replied. "At the moment she is having what is called a fitting, if you know what I mean. It all seems an endless performance."

"Yes, I know very well." Memories of my own trousseau hunting came flooding through my mind.

"Couldn't we all get together?" Bob asked warmly. "Are you staying in town? How about dinner tonight and going to a show and you could give Mary some tips, Mrs. McCrie, she really is rather at sea and I can't tell her much what to buy."

"We're going back to Brigner tomorrow," George said, "and were planning to go to a show tonight . . . what do you say, Monica?"

"I think it would be wonderful," I answered enthusiastically, "and we can talk clothes while you two catch up on the past few years of tea."

"When is the happy day to be, Bob?" George asked. "Quite soon?"

"On September ninth," he answered quietly. "I do hope you people can come? It's to be here at St. Peter's Eaton Square and, unfortunately, a big wedding," he added somewhat ruefully.

"That's just three days before we sail," I said. "We must be there."

For a while the men chatted shop, while I could hardly wait to see what sort of a girl this delightful man was taking out to the jungle. I thought about it all afternoon while we were finishing our own shopping. I could at least perhaps dissuade her from overstocking on shoes and evening gowns! When we met again in the evening I was equally attracted to the slight, trim young girl whose coal-black hair and dark eyes in contrast to Bob's coloring made them a striking couple who drew many admiring glances in the crowded restaurant.

"I can't think of anything nicer than meeting you both," Mary Holmes said frankly. "Mother is in such a spin about my going away so far. When I tell her that I have met a woman who has survived the jungle she will be a new person. You simply must reassure her." As the men became engrossed in their conversation Mary told me that she was an only child and that her father had died two years before. She and Bob had met at a dance three months previously in London and had fallen in love immediately. "Do you think you can come in and meet Mother tomorrow?" Mary asked eagerly.

"We have to get back around lunchtime." I smiled at the bright, appealing face and my heart was full of understanding. "But we could stop for a few moments if nine-thirty wouldn't be too early?"

"Five-thirty wouldn't be too early to suit me," she laughed. She drew out a paper and pencil from her bag. "Will you give me just a few pointers on clothes and things?" she asked. "I really have little idea what I need." And for the rest of the meal we were engrossed in the age-old question of women—what to wear and when to wear it.

The brief meeting with Mary's mother next morning revealed a tall, thin, grey-haired woman whose heart was in the process of breaking at the thought of parting with her only child. It was not so much the fear and anxiety about India as what she did not say that I understood. "She is all I have left," Mrs. Holmes said quietly, "but I want her to know the happiness she deserves. She is such a sweet child, but India seems so far away." As I looked round the large comfortable room, with pictures of Mary and her father everywhere, I knew how very lonely her mother was going to be.

"I'm sure she'll be all right, Mrs. Holmes," I consoled. "I live in a much lonelier place than Mary is going to. It will be so wonderful when she can come home on leave to you, as I've done to my family, and with a grandchild, too, I hope." Mary was busy showing George her collection of fans which took up almost one end of the room and which her mother smilingly said she wanted to take with her.

It was a very brief visit and we did not see Mrs. Holmes again till George and I were shown into a pew in the crowded church directly behind her. Seats had been specially reserved for us, and as the swelling strains of the organ filled the building I gripped

George's hand and held it all through the brief service. It was the first wedding we had been to since our marriage, and much as I had longed for a wedding such as this, my own day would always stand out forever in my memory. We had only a few words with the happy pair at the reception but we made a date to meet again in Assam as soon as the opportunity offered.

It was going to be even harder this time for Mother and Father to part with us and the adored grandchild, and anguishing as it was for me to tear myself away from the family once again, there was deep within me a thrill at the thought of being back once more in the home that I had come to love. Wherever I might go in the future, part of me would always belong to the deep, green jungle and the eternal snows.

Chapter 21

ELIZABETH WAS BUSY making a scrapbook. That is to say, she was lying comfortably on the floor while I was heavily occupied with the glue pot and the scissors pasting her very miscellaneous collection of pictures into a large brown paper book.

I was wiping some of the superfluous glue from my fingers when I heard George's step on the verandah, and the next minute he came into the room, a delighted expression on his face. He had a telegram in his hand. As Elizabeth ran into his arms I could not help noticing for the thousandth time how exactly alike they were.

George was bursting with information.

"We've been transferred," he announced, smiling, "I've just had a wire from the Calcutta office." He handed me the telegram as Elizabeth climbed up on his lap.

I had never thought of such a possibility, but at the same time I realized that it must mean promotion which he so richly deserved.

"We shall be going to Monabari, which is a good deal bigger than this place, where I first started as an assistant, remember? We shall be quite near the Rawlings, which will be fun, won't it?" I thought George sensed the sudden feeling of dismay that gripped me at the prospect of leaving our beloved home so suddenly and I did not want anything to spoil his evident pleasure and satisfaction at the move.

"Why, that will be wonderful." I bent and kissed him warmly, "and my congratulations." I smiled into his eager face. "I'm so delighted for your sake."

"You'll like it in that district, Monica, once you get over the change. I shall be so glad for you to have some near neighbours. There is wonderful jungle fowl and partridge shooting in that grass country too." He smiled slyly at me.

"When do we have to go?" I asked as I gathered up the papers from the floor.

"As soon as we can get packed up. The telegram infers that Hobbs is sick enough for the doctor to want him sent to England immediately and I imagine he will retire. He has done twenty odd years now."

"How far is Monabari from here?" I was screwing the top on the paste bottle while my heart was racing round in circles. This was our home, something that belonged specially to us. There were so many associations bound up in every nook and corner of the place that would remain with me forever. It gave me a sinking feeling to think of leaving it all behind, never to return.

"About two hundred miles or more, down towards Gauhati. I shall have to run along now." He was obviously elated at the sudden turn of events. "We shall all be busy for the next few days."

We had only just recovered from a minor upheaval when our beloved Nero had had to leave us to return to Central India on some family business and her place had been taken by Priscilla. Priscilla was a tiny hill woman from Shillong who had been staying with Mrs. Turner's Ayah. Her former charges had reached the age when they had to go to England to school, and Priscilla was looking for another job.

She came into our lives at dusk one Sunday evening and never left us again. George said she looked as if she ought to be hanging from a tree with one hand. She certainly was rather like a monkey. Elizabeth had taken to her at once and rechristened her "Lilla," and she became a member of the family on whom I leaned heavily. She had been brought up in a Mission school in Shillong from the age of two, when her parents had been killed in the big earthquake of 1897 which almost demolished Shillong. She spoke very good English as well as Hindustani and her native hill tongue.

The packing was a nightmare. We had to do it all ourselves. Elizabeth insisted on "helping" which meant that she simply filled boxes with anything that she could see lying around. When she was safely asleep, Lilla and I would unpack the boxes again and have everything safely stowed away in the right places before morning.

The Turners gave a big farewell party for us to which Ted came. We were all very sad at parting, but Ted as usual hid his feelings and kept the atmosphere on an even keel by his gaiety and irrelevant nonsense.

"Don't think you are shaking us off," he said, "just because you've been promoted two hundred miles away. I, for one, shall be along to visit you whenever I can snatch a few days off—and it will be Christmas at my bungalow every year—don't forget that."

"Don't forget that," murmured Elizabeth, who had acquired the maddening habit of repeating the last few words of every sentence she heard.

"No, and don't you forget me, either, young lady," Ted said, as he hoisted her onto his shoulder. "I had a personal interest in you before you were born." Together they wandered off to preside over the short ceremony of putting Toto to bed. Toto was the beloved Teddy bear Ted had given Elizabeth at her first Christmas party. Nobody knew how he had acquired the name of Toto, but he was never more than a few feet away from her day or night.

The day of our departure dawned somewhat inauspiciously. George had a cracking headache, I had strained my back and Elizabeth had indulged in a bilious attack the night before.

As we stood on the little wayside station surrounded by a mountain of luggage, servants, and caged animals, the atmosphere gradually became more electric. Abdul, Lilla and the cook all appeared to have lost a little of their usual calm. One's personal servants were not part of the plantation labor force as were the sweeper and the pani-wallahs and the gardeners. One employed the house servants oneself and paid their wages, so that they were free to follow to the ends of the earth if they so desired. George, like most men and particularly, I think, Englishmen, was utterly allergic to luggage, especially miscellaneous small packages remembered at the last moment. It was really the crates of animals that finally broke him down. The dogs were barking, the cats meowing pitifully, Petunia, the pet lamb given to Elizabeth by Dr. Chanda, was baa-ing as one demented, the chickens likewise excelled themselves, Isobel was bleating as she had never bleated in her life, the Mynah flapped about his cage like a maniac shrieking "bearer" at the top of his voice. Hercules, outraged at such unexpected and disgusting confinement, was turning round and round in small circles letting out a sequence of loud hoarse roars.

"What a caravan," George said desperately. "It's absolute bedlam. The station master will think I am crazy."

"Well, tell him I am. Say that I'm your sister and that I'm insane, and that you are helping me move to another location."

"A fat lot of good that would be," said George. "He'd probably look in the book and find that the regulations forbid lunatics to travel by train, and then where should we be?"

"I simply can't imagine," I answered weakly. "We hardly know where we are now."

"I certainly don't. This is just a foolish nightmare—I think you must have been brought up in a menagerie in a former existence. My name should have been Noah," George said almost bitterly, "then perhaps this private zoo could have gone in an ark by river."

"We certainly don't have two of everything, though, nothing like it," I answered promptly in self-defense.

"Thank God we haven't, though we probably shall have by the time we reach our journey's end."

"Oh, no, we shan't," I quickly explained. "Nobody is due for at least another three weeks."

George looked at me as if he could have slain me on the spot, and I laughed out loud, only adding fuel to the fire.

"You know you really love the animals," I said. "You are just tired."

"Love them!" he almost shouted. "I could slaughter every last one of them at the moment. I wonder today if I really love you or not." He was mopping his brow for the hundredth time.

"Of course you do," I said with great conviction. "It's because you love me and I love you and the animals and we all love each other that we have such fun. Think what life would be like without us all."

"I'd rather not at the moment," George said quietly as he turned to speak to the station master who eyed us somewhat quizzically. "Please don't tempt me with any such picture."

I turned away with a smothered sigh and sank down somewhat dispiritedly on a pile of suitcases which had been stacked beneath the cool shade of a huge hibiscus bush afire with scarlet blooms. It was perfectly normal, I told myself firmly, for any man to lose his temper in such a situation, and George was a very normal male indeed. For the most part the relationship between us was so ideal

that at times I was a little afraid. From the deep recesses of childhood memories there came to mind a grim pronouncement of my Scottish grandmother's that it was wrong to be too happy and the devil would surely get you if you didn't watch out. There were grey days, though, even in our happiness, for we each had habits that annoyed the other intensely and led to minor quarrels. George never failed to be exasperated by my carelessness in not filling in the stubs in my checkbook, of leaving my sewing needle embedded in the arm of a chair, of my habit of using his razor blade for cutting cord. In turn it was his inability ever to shut a drawer or a cupboard after him which infuriated me at times, his insistence on finishing the last pages of some murder mystery while the soup got cold on the dinner table, and above all his infinite ability to snore in both major and minor keys while lying on his back or on his side, which accomplishment I had to acknowledge was somewhat beyond his control though he stoutly refused even to try my suggested remedy of sleeping with a clothespin on his nose.

The few major quarrels that we had had originated from a strange streak of stubbornness that possessed George at times. It had been only a few weeks before when this stubbornness could easily have cost him his life. A letter arrived from the Calcutta office asking him to go out and inspect a stretch of virgin jungle about fifteen miles from the bungalow. The land was for sale and George was to look it over with a view to its purchase for a new plantation. He had arranged for an elephant to take him out to the place the following Sunday morning. He was to start at dawn and return at dusk, and much against my wishes he was determined to go alone.

On Saturday I awakened with a strange feeling of uneasiness. I mentioned it at breakfast, again at lunch, and by the time we had finished dinner I was in such a state that I asked him not to go at all. In the morning George had been rather amused, at noon he had been patient, but after dinner he was neither amused or patient. There was a sharp edge to his voice as he said, "Don't be ridiculous, my dear. What on earth has come over you? You have been on this tack all day long."

"Please, George, give up the idea of going off by yourself in the morning. I have never had such a feeling of apprehension." I knew

it wasn't just a general fear of the jungle—I had outgrown that—but he knew as well as I did that people did not go on a trip like this alone except in an emergency.

"But what in heaven's name are you afraid of?" George went on. He was looking at me with almost an expression of disgust on his face.

"You have got to do as I say," I begged, "take someone with you."

George was obviously trying to control a rising tide of anger. "Do you expect me to write to the office and tell them that my wife won't let me go out in the jungle alone?"

"I don't expect you to do anything of the sort, but it's not a bad idea," I answered icily, matching my sarcasm to his.

"I think you must be crazy," he shouted. "This sort of a trip alone or not is part of my job . . . and my job comes first."

"Don't tell me that, as if it were news to me. Hasn't your job always come first?"

"And so it should," he snapped back, "any self-respecting man puts his job first. If you could give me any sensible reason for your objections it might be different, but you can't."

"I told you I have a feeling about your going alone and that is all I know," I retorted miserably.

"My dear Monica, you must be mad! One can't run one's life on a woman's feelings. Don't be so childish."

"Many fine men have done just that," I said. We were well on the way to real anger.

"I have told you that I am going alone," George answered bitingly, "and nothing will make me alter my decision."

"Take the assistant with you and then you will have two rifles and two compasses and two elephants."

"He can't possibly go out tomorrow. He has work to do and also must prepare a special invoice of tea for America."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, now we have got America into this," I stormed. "As if an invoice for America matters that much. They drink coffee mostly anyhow."

George was livid. He stared at me as if I really had lost my mind. "Don't be so absolutely foolish," he exploded.

I dreaded that the tears which were not far away might lose me

the battle. "Anyway, it's hopeless to argue with a woman," I heard him say. "I give up."

"That's very generous of you—" but my words were cut short as George banged his hand down loudly on the arm of his chair. "Look, Monica, we simply aren't getting anywhere quarreling like this. I am going just the same."

"Oh, go anywhere you like," I said, "and don't say I didn't warn you." George stormed off into his dressing room and I sat on in the darkness, in a state of despair. For once George had not understood. My inexplicable yet vivid wave of intuition was just so much nonsense to him.

We rose at dawn and, after a hurried breakfast eaten in silence, George left, telling me to expect him by dusk. He took some sandwiches and water, his rifle and a small amount of ammunition, and his pocket compass. He rejected politely my suggestion of a sweater or raincoat as he said he had no intention of prolonging the trip a moment longer than he had to. I watched him mount the elephant, wave a stiff farewell and lope slowly out of sight.

The hours dragged by and the day wore on, but when darkness fell and George had not returned, a deep wave of fear gradually enveloped me. Something *had* happened after all. At midnight, almost beside myself with panic, I roused Abdul with my shouts from the back verandah, and willingly he agreed to waken the boatmen and go down the river with an urgent message to Sam and Julie. Soon after dawn a reply came back from Sam that he was organizing a search party immediately. For almost thirty-six hours I had waited alone in an agony of suspense, and when seemingly at the end of my endurance and on the verge of hysteria, the sound of distant shouting at the foot of the hill brought me rushing out onto the verandah as George wearily came in at the gate. Haggard and drawn though he looked, the joy and release of his coming was all I seemed able to take in. I hardly comprehended that he was explaining, not without remorse, of how he had taken out his handkerchief to stanch the blood from a huge leech bite, and in so doing had evidently drawn out of his pocket and lost his compass. Thereafter as dusk fell he had wandered round and round in circles in the density of the forest in an equal agony of despair, till finally on

the second morning he had heard the searchers' shots and replied with almost his last round of ammunition.

At least I had been right that time, I said to myself as a shrill whistle from the far end of the little station jerked me suddenly from my reverie. George, his composure much restored, was lifting Elizabeth into the train and signaling me to follow suit. A few moments later, with the last of the luggage safely stowed away, we commenced our jolting, shaking way along the narrow gauge line to Monabari.

Chapter 22

OUR NEW BUNGALOW was larger and more rambling than our former home, with beautiful sloping lawns dotted with flowering shrubs and trees. Of flower beds there were none so I should have the satisfaction of doing that part of a garden all over again.

The plantation extended up to the hedge that surrounded the garden, and there was a large meadow alongside that was ideal for the transplanted farm. The type of country surrounding us was entirely different from the dense jungle to which I had become accustomed. I had always felt small beside the mammoth trees and tangled undergrowth of the virgin forests, but in the wide open grassland of the lower Assam valley I had the sensation of being tall, even though the coarse brown thatch grass grew eight feet high in places on either side of the narrow sandy roads. In the distance we could still see the gorgeous snows of the mountains, but the immediate outlook was one of flat expanses of high grass and tea stretching away for miles.

We had two assistants on the plantation but it was a much bigger place so that I knew very well George would have less free time than ever.

It was several days before all our belongings arrived, and all were intact with the exception of my beloved piano. The heavier crates were the last to be stacked onto bullock carts for the six-mile trek from the small railway siding and in the meantime they had been lying out in the open. One night an inquisitive wild elephant had come along and playfully stood upon the case containing the piano. What was left of it was burned up in the factory furnace.

On the day after our arrival the Rawlings came to see us. I was delighted and relieved to see Mary looking so well and happy. "Well, this is an unexpected turn of events, isn't it?" I laughed.

"Five months ago we had no thought of being near neighbors. How has everything been going with you?"

"Wonderfully," she answered without hesitation. "Of course it is awfully strange out here at first, but I love the life. If only Mummy wasn't alone I could be perfectly content." A passing sadness clouded her young face.

"I know, my dear, it is hard for her, but I shall be able to write and tell her how well you look. You'll have to excuse the muddle at the moment," I said, "we shall soon get straightened out."

"It took me weeks," Mary said, "but we have the dearest bungalow looking across the rice fields and it's been such fun fixing it up. It's the animals that scare the life out of me, though. You almost never go out without meeting a leopard or a bear or a tiger. Sometimes you hit the jackpot and meet all three."

"Never mind, my dear," I said. "I've got to get used to them, too. We don't see so many in dense jungle, but anyway now we have human neighbors too which is a great blessing."

"I'm so thankful you people are here," Bob announced as we settled ourselves on packing cases for a picnic supper. Ted with his usual thoughtfulness had given us a going-away present of a wonderful assortment of canned fruits, fish, meat, jelly and cookies.

"And we're thankful you're here," I answered warmly. "It's been quite a wrench leaving our first home."

"How many of us are there in the district now?" George asked.

"About twenty, I think," Bob said. "The Jacksons, the Parkers, the Warrens, you, us—that accounts for the married people; then I think the bachelor contingent numbers around a dozen, exclusive of the doctor."

"Mrs. Parker is just leaving for England to take her twin boys to school," Mary said, "so that leaves only Mrs. Jackson and Mrs. Warren in the female line besides you and me. Mrs. Jackson is quite a big game hunter and a wonderful artist besides."

"Everyone is fine except Mrs. Warren and she is nothing less than a pain in the neck." Bob's mouth was crammed full of California peaches.

"What's the matter with her?" I asked.

"What isn't the matter with her!" he groaned. "She loathes it out here and everything to do with it. She can't stand the heat, spends

most of the monsoon in Shillong, won't have children, grumbles incessantly and enjoys a state of more or less imaginary ill health."

"That's enough to go on," George laughed, "why does she stay?"

"I can't imagine," Bob said. "And old Bill Warren is such a mighty fine chap I wonder he doesn't break her neck."

"She's a very striking-looking person, though," Mary put in, "with her black hair and green eyes, and she dresses beautifully, too, but she just doesn't seem to make any effort to adjust herself even after four years."

"You'll be down at the club on Sunday to meet everyone, won't you?" Mary asked. "I love the club days on Sunday and Wednesday afternoons. It's a real sorting-house for all the news and gossip for miles around."

"Oh, we'll be there," I exclaimed. "We're all agog to meet everybody and I can't imagine anything so exciting as a club. I'm accustomed to living in solitary splendor."

"Do they still keep up this business of having to go around calling?" George inquired as he helped Mary into the buggy.

"Yes, you'll have to be a good boy and do your stuff," Bob laughed at George's disgusted look and with a wave of the hand they were off into the night.

It was the custom in India that a bride was always called on by her new neighbors, for the first twelve months. After that she joined the ranks of those who did the calling when anyone moved into the district. An exception had had to be made for me in our isolation as many of our neighbors were scattered over a great distance and the men folk had not had the time to make the journey. Thus they had all collected at Julie Turner's in a bunch and gotten it over with! Now, however, George and I would have to start our round of calls in the evenings and I wasn't looking forward to it too much in view of the fact that according to all accounts there were only too many jungle beasts dallying on the roadside waiting to pay their calls on you as you drove along the narrow, bumpy, winding roads. We decided to defer starting in on that part of the routine until we had made our first public appearance the following Sunday.

The Club was a low thatched building about fifty feet long. The main room was flanked on one side by a bar, and at either end by two small rooms which were used as changing rooms and "rest

rooms" marked respectively "He's" and "She's." They contained a dresser with mirror, enamel basins on fixed shelves against the walls and a couple of commodes modestly nestling behind a screen. Bridge tables and wicker chairs took up most of the room in the main part of the club. There were three tennis courts in front of the little building and a small six-hole golf course laid out on a stretch of open grassland at the back of the club.

Everyone was very friendly. George already knew some of the men from his stay in the district before, and after some strenuous tennis we played bridge for a short time before going home. It seemed very strange to me to be able to meet so many people at one time and a mere mile and a half from our house. "I think I shall like it here, George," I said as we ate a belated dinner, "once I get used to civilization. Let's get this calling over and done with so that we can feel we really belong to the community."

"Any time you like," was the response, "it can't be too soon for me."

"Well, we'll start tomorrow, then," I suggested, "as soon as you are through."

We decided to begin with the Warrens. I was rather curious to see her in her own home. They had an attractive bungalow beautifully furnished, and surrounded by a garden that was crying out for attention. At the end of our brief visit I had formed the same opinion of her as Bob. She was smartly dressed in a white crepe frock, her mosquito boots enhanced by bright golden heels. A gold comb in her hair and gold earrings carried out the color scheme. She was courteous and languorous, and I thought it must be somewhat of an effort for her to live at all. Her husband and George drifted inevitably into a long conversation on tea and I wondered how such an alert, virile type of man could endure such daily lethargy in his partner. His prematurely grey hair offset very blue eyes and a fresh complexion, and his whole attitude was alive and friendly and charming.

"Have you any family?" I asked Mrs. Warren casually after she had remarked what a sweet child Elizabeth seemed to be when she met her at the club.

"Good heavens, no, my dear," she replied. "I wouldn't have children in this country for anything. It would drive me mad looking

after them the way you have to in the jungle—snakes, malaria, sunstroke. No, thank you, and what's the use anyhow? You only have to part with them just when they are most interesting." Her words stabbed me as I realized again that it wouldn't be so long before our laughing, grey-eyed daughter would have to be left in England to go to school. I thrust the idea from my mind and turned the conversation into easier channels. I found that Mrs. Warren was an expert in petit-point needlework which I loved.

"Will you show me how to do it?" I asked as she picked up the stool on which her trim feet had been resting so that I could see the beautiful design she had worked.

"Of course I will." She smiled. "At any time, if you ever have a moment to devote to it."

"I have lots of time in the evenings," I said. "I can switch from knitting for a change."

It was incredible to me that anyone so apparently hard and empty could want to produce anything so beautiful. She has probably been spoiled all her life, I thought as we got up to take our leave, and perhaps she had married that nice husband, as Bob had remarked, because he had a private income and could pander to her every wish. I was about to say as much to George as we drove out of their garden in the quickly gathering dusk but as we turned into the road a large leopard was sitting right in the middle of our path enjoying the evening breeze. It merely blinked at us for a moment and then quietly loped off into the grass.

"Oh, George!" I gasped as I gripped the buggy. "Are we really to expect this, every day?"

"You'll get absolutely used to meeting things, darling," he laughed as he whipped up the pony, "they will never touch you, honestly."

"I hope you're right," I answered faintly, but at the moment I would gladly have exchanged the open grassland for the solitude of our jungle fastness.

About three miles further on, a dark object suddenly skipped out of the grass, took one look at us and skipped back again.

"What was that?" I asked, grabbing at George's arm.

"A small bear." George was perfectly calm.

"Oh, just a small one," I breathed, trying to relax.

Then I noticed that George was looking over his shoulder into the back of the buggy.

"What are you looking for?" I was still badly frightened.

"I was looking to see if Abdul had put my rifle in before we left. I see he did."

"Do we always take one with us, then?"

"Yes, always," George answered firmly. "It's a form of insurance I always count on. I never went without it before, and I never had occasion to use it. See that you don't go without it, either." He patted my hand encouragingly, though he knew I could not shoot a rifle to save my life.

Knowing that you are living among wild animals that you almost never see, as we did in our jungle home, was quite different, I thought, from sharing your life with them quite openly as one acquaintance to another, so to speak. It was going to take a firm stand on my part to strangle once again my old enemy—fear. I realized that I had better start immediately and get used to my furry neighbors quickly as long as they were to be constantly in my way.

"I only hope there is enough for them to eat in this open country!" I said with a shudder.

The dogs had to be chained on the screened verandah before dusk every evening, for there was nothing a leopard liked better than a well-fed dog. It was not unknown for a hungry beast to come into the bungalow at night and take a dog, if any doors were left open.

Often I lay awake listening to the strange noises of these prowling animals, wondering whether we had remembered to close everything securely. I looked anxiously through the wire screens. Sometimes I saw two bright green luminous eyes looking back at me, and sometimes I saw only a dark shadow beneath the bushes.

The philosophical point of view was much easier to accept from inside the safely screened doors and windows than when getting into the buggy while Abdul carefully tucked the rifle in the back with the disconcerting clatter of a handful of loose shells.

It was a pity, I realized as we proceeded with our calls through the week, that the Parkers were just leaving. Their small boys would have been ideal companions for Elizabeth although they were almost seven years of age. Mrs. Parker was in the midst of

dismantling the bungalow the evening we visited them. She was a large, round, forceful woman who completely bossed the household. Almost the first thing she said to us was that she had decided it would be a good idea for us to take over her tennis afternoon and that she would speak to the club secretary who was one of her husband's assistants, if we were agreeable. From there she ran on to say that the local baker was a rascal and needed careful watching to see that he didn't use flour that she was convinced was mixed with sand. It didn't surprise me at all that her husband was one of the still silent kind who, according to Bob, spent unnecessarily long hours on the plantation.

"Will you be away long, Mrs. Parker?" George asked brightly as he offered to sit on a trunk that refused to close even for Mrs. Parker's ample muscles.

"I'm going to stay with the boys till they are old enough to go to a preparatory school," she answered firmly. "I probably shan't come back for several years." I was so astonished I stared at her with open mouth. What on earth would happen to the silent Mr. Parker during those several years? All at once I realized that here we were back at the same old question which I tried so earnestly to keep at the back of my mind. Were you going to leave your child alone in England, or were you going to stay with the child and let your husband fend for himself, as at least two or three husbands in the district were currently doing? I glanced at Mrs. Parker standing with arms akimbo, but her face was the kind that expressed little emotion, and her rather untidy brown hair was almost as lifeless as her brown eyes and brown cotton dress. Thank goodness Margaret Jackson and Mary would be fairly near me, I thought, for suddenly I felt strangely lonely and depressed and I wished we had never had to leave Julie and Sam and Ted and all the others. I had a sickening wave of longing for our home on the hill and the swiftly flowing river.

I was rather comforted to hear Margaret Jackson say that Mrs. Parker always left her feeling flat and inefficient. "She is so terribly strong and adequate," Margaret laughed as we sat on their verandah a day or two later watching the sunset over the snows, "and she thinks my hobbies of painting and sitting up for big game with Roy are unwomanly, and that I should devote more time to the house."

"She frightens me to death," Roy Jackson announced firmly amidst our general laughter. "She told me she once put a new roof on their summer cottage in England single-handed."

"That's the stuff," George grinned slowly. "Get married and let your wife do the work."

"I'm rather sorry for those little boys," Margaret said quietly. "I think they need to get away from such a rugged atmosphere, they are too quiet and well behaved, to my way of thinking."

I glanced at Margaret covertly and I wondered if five years had left her childless by accident or design. She wasn't particularly good-looking, but she had a very soft and gentle expression and she exuded a quiet kind of strength which was perhaps just what her husband needed since he gave one the impression of being a nervous, highly strung man who might easily curl up in a crisis. He was everlastingly jumping up and down from his chair on some pretext or other, running his hand through his dark hair and jerking his shoulders at the same time. Margaret had made the bungalow part studio and part big game museum and I couldn't imagine how such a slender creature could handle a heavy rifle and sit up for hours in a tree waiting for her prey. She flushed to the roots of her fair hair when I complimented her on her skill and courage.

"I get a great thrill out of it," she answered modestly. "It doesn't take courage to do what you really enjoy, does it?"

There was a look of sincerity in the grey eyes and I knew that I was going to like this wholesome girl very much indeed. She and Mary and I often spent mornings together at our respective bungalows, and with the efforts of Margaret and myself Mary was soon speaking Hindustani with surprising fluency. Sometimes we accompanied Margaret to a nearby spot on their plantation when she wanted to paint. It was a tall feathery bamboo grove which flanked the tea on one side and on the other looked across an open stretch of grassland towards the mountains. In no time at all, it seemed to Mary and me, she had captured an exquisite view with her deft brush, and she was equally successful with her paintings of workers plucking and little groups of fat, round, naked children. She could turn as easily from that to shooting a tiger, and she was quite disgusted when one of the biggest beasts in our locality was denied her steady aim because it was killing cattle close to our coolie lines

where too many people were around for safe shooting. We knew that our workers were becoming increasingly alarmed, and Abdul came hurrying in one evening, full of concern, to say that a line *chowkidar*, or watchman, had just reported that a tiger had killed a cow right in the lines.

"Oh, blast the thing!" George said disgustedly. "That means we shall have to use a trap which I hate to do, but it is the only alternative. Naturally the people are scared to death."

A trap was hurriedly made for the hunter, and a few nights later he walked into it. One of our assistants volunteered to shoot him. He turned out to be a large leopard, and the possessor of a magnificent skin.

It was a cruel business, which George would never permit unless it was absolutely unavoidable in order to insure the safety of life and property. The trap was made from stout bamboo in the shape of a small hut, divided into two partitions. In one partition a small goat was placed so that its bleating attracted the leopard, who, when he walked into the adjoining partition in an endeavor to take the goat, was caught by a spring door, and was unable to escape. He then had to be shot in the trap, after the goat had been removed.

We were only too delighted to accept the secretary's invitation a week or so later to take over Mrs. Parker's tennis afternoon. There was ample space in our garden for two courts, and for long enough we had been on the receiving end of the Turners' unlimited hospitality. It was wonderful to feel that we could at last throw open our house to any and all who cared to come. On the first Friday practically everyone in the district was with us. There was an exquisite mass of palm trees in one corner of the garden which was just the place to set out the tables and chairs for tea and drinks. Our final guests left our tennis party shortly after midnight! When dusk had fallen and the mosquitoes had taken over, we went into the bungalow where some played bridge, others danced to the strains of our ancient phonograph, and the four women in our small community almost wore their feet out in their efforts to see that all the men had a fair share of the festivities. Even Mrs. Warren unbent sufficiently to perform her duties as a guest in a rather patronizing manner. When we were all exhausted we played silly games with paper and pencils and finally charades in which Bob Rawlings ex-

celled. So the pattern was set for many moons to come, and besides our Fridays there was hardly a day in the week when somebody or other didn't drop by for a drink and a chat.

I also acquired a more stoical attitude towards the inevitable encounters with wild beasts, but that attitude was acquired slowly. If we wanted to go and play bridge in the evenings with the Rawlings and the Jacksons there was nothing for it but to whip up a spirit of bravado and to remember that all the other inhabitants of the district had been doing the same thing for years and years and none of them had been eaten yet.

As we sat sweltering under the punkah one evening a few months later George suddenly asked me if we should buy a car.

"Buy a car?" I was astounded. "Wherever from?"

"I had a note from Barker today to say he is going back to England for good. He wonders if we would like his old Ford?" There were only three cars in the district, owned by the Warrens, the doctor and Mr. Barker, who was separated from the rest of the district by a wild and tempestuous river.

"The car idea is a good one," I answered warmly. "Just think, if we had a car, I could put my thumb to my nose at the leopards and bears and things as we whizzed by, without any fear of being overtaken for reprisals!"

"Your imagination was always outstanding, darling," George laughed. "Still, I admit it is a great deal pleasanter at these times to be in a car. Barker wants us to go over to bridge and dinner on Sunday and have a look at the Ford if we are interested."

"There's that awful river to cross," I said reluctantly. "I mean the big wide one. I don't much care for that at this rainy time of year, especially having to cross on an elephant."

"His elephant is well trained," George answered reassuringly, "and it crosses the river every day. There is nothing to worry about."

The heavy rain held off until we were in the middle of dinner the following Sunday night at Jim Barker's bungalow. We had safely accomplished the thirteen-mile drive to the river and the crossing on his elephant, in only a moderate flood of water. It was enough of a flood for me, however, as the river was a half mile wide and full of swiftly moving currents.

"Just listen to that rain," I said uneasily. "What shall we do?"

"It won't last long," Mr. Barker said calmly. "It's only a passing shower." It sounded to me like a cloudburst.

"But it's enough to flood the river," I persisted, "especially if it's raining up in the mountains."

Nobody thought there was much chance of trouble in such a short time, so we proceeded to play bridge, with Jim Barker's assistant as a fourth. I played with George and did everything wrong that I could possibly do, finally trumping his ace in the rubber game.

"Whatever are you thinking about, Monica?" he asked, disgustedly, for I had already revoked in the previous hand. I said that I was thinking of the new curtains I wished for the guest room, and almost sent the three of them into a tailspin.

About midnight we decided to make a bolt for home, as the rain had stopped. A watery moon was shining halfheartedly through the clouds when we left the bungalow, which was near the river. As we squelched our way to the spot where the elephant was waiting we could hear the water roaring along at what seemed to be a good fifty miles an hour.

The *mahout* had become tired of waiting for us and had gone to visit some friends in a nearby village, leaving in charge only the young boy who always accompanied him to cut jungle for the elephant to eat. George's language was picturesque, and my spirits sank to zero as I took one look at the boiling river which had developed into almost full flood. I walked behind the elephant and pulled a couple of hairs out of its tail.

"What on earth are you doing?" George asked irritably.

"I was just pulling some hairs out of the elephant's tail," I said. "They are supposed to be very lucky, and it looks as if we shall need some luck."

"I can take the elephant across, Sahib," the boy said confidently. "I often do it for Barker Sahib. Let me show Sahib," he begged.

"Well, I don't know," George said doubtfully. "Shall we take a chance on it? Seems to me it's a bit risky."

"We'll have to," I answered, though my heart sank even lower at the prospect. "We must get back, and the river may rise higher if we wait much longer. I'm willing to take a chance if you are."

So we clambered up on the elephant, the boy riding in front, to steer the huge beast as he had seen the *mahout* steer it, by sticking

his toes into the back of its ears. I was next, and George sat at the back. We lolloped slowly towards the river, the elephant waving its trunk high in the air, searching, it seemed, this way and that for something it was unable to find.

Elephants, as it happens, are beasts with strong likes and dislikes, and this elephant, when we had got barely halfway across the angry waters, suddenly decided that it disliked the idea of going one inch further. In fact, what it wanted to do was to sit down there and then. Elephants do not like to be separated from their own *mahout*, and as the huge beast started slowly to lower its haunches into the surging waters I let out a penetrating yell. The moon had disappeared behind a bank of thick clouds, and it was pitch dark. The water was swirling angrily about our feet and huge logs and massive pieces of debris hurtled past at breakneck speed.

"George!" I screamed. "I shall be off in a moment."

"Hang on to the boy," he commanded, "and I'll hang on to you . . . I'll dig my heels into the elephant's sides."

This treatment was entirely ineffective. A *mahout* will stir an unwilling elephant into action by prodding it behind the ears with a sharp implement, but we had no proper *mahout* and no proper implement, only a small boy who was quickly becoming wildly excited, calling on his gods at the top of his voice, while I quietly and nonetheless fervently called on ours.

Just as we were all about to slip into the water there was a terrific crash of thunder which seemed to rip the sky from one side to the other. The elephant shivered with shock, let out a blood-curdling screech and charged ahead, carrying us safely to the opposite bank. Of the rest of the trip home I remembered almost nothing.

"Absolutely never again will I cross that river in the monsoon," I said to George, as we finally got into bed about three in the morning. "I am sure my hair is snow-white. Will you have a look?"

George had just turned out the bedside lamp and flatly refused to turn it on again to pander to any such flights of fancy.

"Just go to sleep, darling," he answered somewhat tersely, as he pulled the bedclothes tightly up around his ears. "We'll buy the car anyhow and that will make our getting about a lot easier."

But in that pious hope we were strangely deceived. The car was more temperamental than the most pampered woman. Sometimes

she would behave beautifully and at other times she was a devil. She suffered from strange and recurring internal complaints. It necessitated our traveling always with a fine darning needle, with which we had to administer sundry probings to something called a pilot-jet. A package of adhesive tape went with us to cater to unforeseen occurrences with a dislodged petrol pipe. The carburetor was always either overfed or drastically undernourished. At the worst possible moments, in the vicinity of wild beasts, the lights gradually faded away and we had no matches with which to light the lantern. At least we hadn't the first time, and no one particularly cared to get out, anyhow, to hang the thing on the front of the car, with the hot breath of a bear on the back of his neck.

I actually preferred to drive in the old buggy. You could at least whip up the horse and *make* it go in an emergency. And this I actually did one afternoon some weeks later when returning from a visit with the Jacksons. Margaret had discovered that she was expecting a baby after five years, and excitement was running high all over the district. About a mile from their bungalow a tiger rose with startling suddenness out of the grass beside the road and started to follow close behind the buggy, its jaws open. I very seldom whacked an animal, but on this occasion I gave the pony a mighty crack across the back, as I felt my hair literally start to stand on end. We careered along madly, the tiger in pursuit. It was so unusual for one to follow like this that I knew it must be hungry. I felt as if at last I had met my Waterloo.

Just as I reached the outskirts of the plantation, two tame buffaloes walked out of the tea. I prayed that if there was to be an attack it would be on them and not on me, and that was exactly what did happen, for one buffalo was found mauled to death shortly after I had arrived home.

I was thankful that George and Elizabeth had gone to the factory when I got in, for I needed time to recover my poise. I flung myself into a chair and asked Abdul to make me some very strong tea. It would be impossible, I mused, for people living in civilization to believe that such happenings were really true and part of the daily round with us. It was always after such experiences that I felt myself slipping. Earnestly as I would strive to fight them off, great waves of the old fears and discouragements would temporarily

swamp me. I wondered if I could endure this sort of life for another ten, twenty, or thirty years. At times I felt I could not measure up to the exacting demands of the path on which my feet were planted. I was crazy to have thought I could. And so it would go on, all down the long line of torturing apprehensions, until I was in the depths of bleak and silent despair.

Eventually, however, the realization would be borne in on me once again, and each time with a stronger sense of conviction, that no matter where one was, or in what state of life, or country of the world, there were always problems to be faced, battles to be waged, and victory to be won. I could not be happy without George and we belonged together. I had advanced well in many ways I told myself, and uplifted by a little quiet self-praise I would take a deep breath and carry on.

Chapter 23

GEORGE WAS MENDING one of his favorite golf clubs on the verandah one Sunday morning while he waited for Elizabeth, who was to accompany him on one of their many jaunts to the factory together. I thought he grew more handsome with each passing year. Added responsibility sat lightly on his broad shoulders. In fact, he had seemed to thrive on it, and under his capable supervision the plantation had improved tremendously. It was wonderfully satisfying to me, too, that I had acquired such a thorough knowledge of what his job comprised as to be able to discuss it with him in detail and to know and understand what he was talking about. I could tell also at a glance what was good plucking and what wasn't, and distinguish the flowery orange pekoe with its flakes of light gold in the finished leaf product from the less fine pekoe that might disqualify itself by pieces of stalk which were the planter's nightmare. As season had followed season, both cold and hot, I had learned what it meant, from cultivation to plucking and manufacture, to produce one of the many everyday comforts the world takes for granted. Certainly I thought to myself as I looked at him, George was one of the most well-adjusted and contented mortals it could be any woman's happy fate to love.

Elizabeth came skipping onto the verandah clean and shining after her bath. One of the things that she liked best was to go to the factory with George when he was "tea-spitting" as she called it. The extremely important and specialized ritual of tea-tasting each mid-day meant nothing to her at all. What thrilled her was the sight of Daddy solemnly rolling the daily samples of brewed tea round and round in his mouth like a mouthwash, finally spitting them with great precision into a pail kept for the purpose. The highlight of the proceedings was the fact that she was allowed to put the pail at some considerable distance from him and that he scored a bull's-eye every time. The fact that Daddy could spot in a moment, on tasting

the samples, if there was the slightest thing wrong with the previous day's plucking or manufacture did not concern her.

The pair had just walked off to the factory, oblivious of the heat, when Bob Rawlings came riding up the front driveway. He did not dismount at the verandah as usual and I went out to greet him. "Hello, Bob," I said, "aren't you coming in?"

"I won't if you'll forgive me," he smiled, pushing back his topee and wiping his auburn curls with his handkerchief. "I'm on my way to see Warren on business, but Mary asked me to stop by to see if you will come over to dinner and bridge on Friday. . . . It's my birthday," he added sheepishly.

"Splendid," I laughed. "As far as I know it will be fine. George is at the factory, but tell Mary if I don't send a note by tomorrow we will be there."

"That's grand," he wheeled his horse around, "and give my love to the family—you're better inside today, it's terribly hot."

"I'll make you one of your favorite fruit cakes if I don't wilt before," I said as I wiped my own perspiring brow.

A slow grin spread over his handsome face. "That would certainly make my day," and with a wave of the hand he cantered off down the drive. As he turned the corner of the bungalow a shaft of sunlight through the palm trees caught his hair, turning it to a deep burnished copper.

I took my cook book from the shelf in the living room. "I wonder when they will have a baby," I ruminated, idly thumbing my way through the pages. It was almost two years now. I put a slip of paper to mark the special recipe which I decided to make next morning and returned the book to its place. But before Friday came around, little Mary Rawlings was dead and buried.

On Wednesday morning she sent me a note to say that she was running a temperature and that the doctor thought it was malaria. My heart sank as I read it, for my own experience had remained a vivid and uncomfortable memory through the years. True, it had, ironically enough, helped to plant my feet on firm ground, but Mary had been faithful in wearing her mosquito boots from the beginning and this seemed a little unfair to say the least. I penciled a hasty reply that we would be over to see her as soon as George had finished work. Just as we were getting into the buggy about five

o'clock a frantic s.o.s. arrived by messenger from Bob to say that Mary was unconscious with a temperature of 106°. "It must be cerebral malaria," George said gravely. "Let's hurry." Neither of us spoke during the two-and-a-half-mile drive for we were both too occupied with the same thoughts. The doctor met us as we walked up the verandah steps, a grim expression on his face. "She is sinking, I'm afraid," he spoke rapidly. "It is cerebral malaria. I can't hold out much hope."

Leaving George in earnest conversation with the doctor, I hurried to the bedroom at the far end of the verandah. Bob was kneeling beside the bed, an agonized expression on his face, Mary's small hands clasped in one of his own, the other resting on her forehead above the scarlet flushed cheeks and closed eyes. He took no notice of me as I sank into a chair at the other side of the bed. I glanced helplessly round the room where there were scattered undergarments, stockings, riding boots, a cotton frock, while on a chair in the corner Mary's favorite Siamese cat lay curled in deep and unconcerned slumber. I glanced back at the still little figure beneath the dampened sheets. I leaned over and felt her arms which almost burnt my hands with their fiery heat. I spoke softly to Bob but he gave no answer. A slight breeze momentarily billowed the curtains away from the windows, and in the distance the low howl of a jackal sent a shiver down my spine. Through the next two hours we waited and watched in awful silence. Suddenly her breathing seemed to become more labored. She moaned gently, and there was a flickering of the eyelids. Bob quickly slipped his arm beneath her pillow and raised her gently a few inches and as he did so she gave a sighing gasp and her small dark head rolled over on his shoulder.

"Mary, Mary!" The dreadful anguish of that cry must have rung to the ends of the earth. It almost stopped my heart and brought me to my knees beside the bed. I could scarcely breathe. I knew that she was gone. My brain seemed to be spinning in helpless confusion as great shuddering sobs broke the stillness in the room. Wildly and passionately Bob kissed her lips, her neck, her breast, pouring the wealth of his love and devotion into unhearing ears. Burying his head at last in her hair he wept as if his heart would break. Through my own blinding tears I suddenly saw George and the doctor

standing at the foot of the bed, both openly and unashamedly moved. And there was nothing that we could do to help. At a sign from the doctor George walked over to Bob and put his hand gently on his shoulder.

"Bob," he said quietly, "come with me."

Bob paid no attention except to gather the still form closer to him, tender, heartbreaking words pouring from his lips. A few more agonizing moments passed in which I buried my face in my hands, unable fully to realize that Mary was dead and that the almost unbearable anguish and poignancy of the situation in which we were partners was not some nightmare from which we should presently awake. Once more the doctor signed to George, then they gently released Bob, now unresisting and unseeing, and raised him to his feet. Together they supported his stumbling figure out of the room.

Alone with death for the first time I seemed to have no fear, but I hardly knew what I was doing, it had all been so sudden and so unexpected. I got to my feet and stood looking at the little face so still and peaceful. "This almost happened to me a few years ago," I said to myself. "This is death, and as George always says, it is not those who go for whom one has to grieve, but for those who are left behind. O God, why did this have to happen?" I could not keep back my tears; I wept unrestrainedly. At the touch of a hand on my arm I turned and looked into the doctor's troubled and weary face.

"My dear," he said quietly, "do you think that you could help me?"

"Help you . . .?" The significance of his remark escaped me entirely.

He glanced at the bed. "This is hard, I know, but we must take care of her. We shall have to take the midnight freight train into Razpur and it is seven o'clock now." Suddenly the realization of what he was trying to say broke over me like an enormous wave. Why, of course, Mary had to be buried quickly, as soon as possible. A coffin had to be made, she must be bathed and dressed. Wild panic gripped me by the throat. The horror of death and a speedy burial which had always been a nightmare to me in the tropics suddenly rose in front of me like an evil picture on a screen. I could hardly speak for the dryness in my throat.

"Where is George?" I said rather wildly. "Ask him to come and speak to me." I felt that the sight of him would help me to pull myself together for the ordeal that lay ahead.

"He has gone to the factory to help get a coffin made, my dear," he answered kindly. "There are a good many things to see to, you know, in a short time."

"Oh yes, Doctor, I understand." With all the power at my command I endeavored to regain some semblance of tranquillity. "Tell me what to do and I'll do it."

"That's the girl," he answered quietly. "Just bring water and clean towels and look for some simple dress in her closet." As we performed the last loving tasks I thought of George suffering as acutely in the work he had to do. In the jungle there are no funeral parlors, no experienced undertakers to take over the burdens that fall so suddenly on the living. Your neighbors do all that has to be done and are your friends indeed. The nearest cemetery was almost forty miles away in the small town of Razpur, where a grave was always kept in readiness. It was not possible, however, to have a coffin available at a moment's notice. White ants would soon destroy anything made of wood before it had been standing a few weeks in our climate. A coffin had to be made as and when required, and often was so heavy, with the unseasoned wood available, that it was difficult to transport. Everyone in the district always attended a funeral whether the one who had died was a close friend or not. It was the least that one could do in a small group of countrymen living together so far from civilization. In the absence of the minister from the town the service was read at the graveside by the Deputy Commissioner or even by a friend.

Deluging monsoon rain set in as we boarded the coach that had been attached to the midnight freight, in one empty car of which Bob insisted on riding alone with Mary. I clung to George's hand all the way. There were about twenty of us in the coach and conversation of any sort was negligible. A sudden death in a small community has a most disturbing and upsetting effect on all alike, and in this case the young wife had made herself beloved by all. The rain ceased temporarily as we arrived about three in the morning in the sleep-enshrouded town. The cemetery was half a mile from the

railroad station. The early evening telegram had brought the white residents to the station to meet us and provide the necessary transportation of truck and private cars.

A pale moon made its appearance from behind thunderclouds as we stumbled over the gravestones of those whose earthly journey had already been completed. A warm, soft breeze sprang up, setting the palm trees sighing in tune with the heaviness of our hearts.

The Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Anson, read the burial service by the light of a flickering lantern, since it had been impossible to recall the minister from his tour. Several times the lantern blew out at the graveside. Two feet of water lay at the bottom of the grave, and it had to be bailed out by buckets that were passed continuously up and down during the service.

The whole situation was so unreal it bordered on the fantastic. It would have been so much easier in bright sunlight with the birds singing. In the far distance, it seemed to me, familiar words were being quietly spoken—"I am the Resurrection and the Life . . . He that believeth in Me though he were dead yet shall he live. . . ." Over and over I repeated them to myself. This was not the end. It could not be. One must believe—one must. More than that, one must know that this was the truth, or such situations would be unendurable. Every now and then above the words of the speaker and the quiet sighing of the breeze, Bob's gentle sobbing wrung our hearts, and all the while there was the hideous metallic sound of the buckets bailing, bailing, bailing.

After it was all over, we took Bob with us to the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow. Mr. Anson was a friend of his and ours, and had offered to put us up for what remained of the night. The rest of the gathering were divided between neighbors and the club premises.

As soon as possible I made my excuses and retired to our room, where I flung myself on the bed without bothering to undress. I lay dry-eyed and exhausted, struggling vainly to keep my emotions under control and to think of Mary as she had always been, laughing and gay and sweet and in no sense a part of the hideous drama of the past few hours.

George came quietly into the room a few moments later and lay down beside me. "Don't take it too hard, darling," he comforted. "This isn't the end, it is only a new beginning, I am sure of that."

"Oh, how I wish I had your absolute faith." I wept quietly. "You are always so strong, so certain of things. I just can't bear to leave her alone out there and there is a storm coming up." Lightning was flashing intermittently and away in the distance thunder was growling ominously round the hills.

"She isn't there, my love; don't think of it that way. It isn't the body or the shape of the eyes or nose or hands that one loves, it is the qualities that a person expresses that mean so much and those can never die, we keep them forever in memory. I realized all this so clearly after Mother and Father went so tragically." A vestige of a sigh escaped him and I turned and put my arms around his neck.

"I know you must be right," I whispered, "but this has been so dreadfully sudden."

"Of course it has. But I like to think of death as, somehow, when you see a ship off to sea. It finally passes from your sight but you know that it still goes on, certain of the welcome on the other side." I could not speak, I just clung to him. It was so typical of all his innermost thoughts, fine and true and powerful in their gentleness. "Bob's a fine fellow." George said after a while, "he will stand up to it, I know, and later he will make a new life for himself. We have to go on, you know, darling."

I drew back slightly and looked up into the face so clearly outlined in the semi-darkness. "What do you mean by that? He'll marry again?"

"I don't know that I meant that specifically, dearest." Gently he put my head back on his shoulder. "But I expect he may in time. I think he should. One can't shut oneself off for the rest of one's life and just go on grieving, nobody would want that for someone they loved."

"Oh, but Georgie, it could never be the same again, it just couldn't."

"Never quite the same, no, of course not," he answered quietly, "but I think that one has to try and come out into the sunlight and let the shadows fall behind."

Chapter 24

FOR TWO OR THREE months thunder had been rolling round the mountains almost every night with seasonal thoroughness.

Being more or less inured to storms, I wakened one night thinking that it had been merely a loud clap of thunder which had disturbed my slumbers. The clock by my bed said two A.M. and now fully awake I realized that the disturbance was a loud and prolonged hammering at the verandah door, which roused George at the same time. "What the dickens can that be?" he grumbled lustily as he lighted the lantern and slipped his feet into his shoes. I could hear a horse pawing the ground and large heavy drops of rain were falling on the roof. A hurried conversation was taking place at the door, and in a few moments George returned with a note which he read aloud by the light of the lantern. "It's for you," he said in some surprise, "Roy Jackson's Syce brought it and it says 'Please will you come at once, am frantic, Margaret has bad pains.'"

"Oh, for goodness sake!" I leapt hurriedly out of bed. "Why, the baby isn't due for another three weeks."

"But you can't go alone, darling." George was horrified. "Not at this time of night."

"I must go alone," I replied firmly. "There is nothing else for it. We can't take Elizabeth over there, and we have never dreamed of leaving her at night with the servants. There is no possible alternative and I must hurry."

"This is too much." George was pacing the floor. "I simply can't let you go out at this hour alone. Why on earth couldn't he have sent for Mrs. Warren? They have no children to worry about."

"That's probably the reason," I laughed quietly as I hurried into some clothes. Rain was now coming down in tropical fury and everything in the room was illuminated intermittently by vivid flashes of lightning. "Anyway, I've got to go; I know all that you

are thinking and I am too, but it's got to be done. May I borrow your raincoat? Mine is in ribbons."

At that moment Elizabeth, roused from her sleep, padded quickly into our room. "Where are you going, Mummy?" she asked somewhat tearfully.

"I am going to see Mrs. Jackson, my pet." I lifted her onto my bed. "The stork may be visiting her tonight and she wants me to help her get ready for the baby."

Elizabeth was silent for a moment. "Birds don't fly at night, do they, Daddy?" she said positively. Daddy was too engrossed with his own emotions to answer that one.

"Daddy and you take care of each other," I tucked her into my bed, "and I'll be back as soon as I can." Gathering a change of clothes and my book entitled *Advice for the Young Mother in Far Away Places*, I slipped on George's coat and hugged him warmly.

"Well, I still can't. . . ."

"Don't say any more, Georgie." He followed me miserably onto the rain-swept verandah. "I'll be perfectly all right. If I took the car I'd probably never get there the way it acts up, and look, they've sent Gertrude, thank goodness." To the accompaniment of a blinding flash of lightning I clambered into the buggy. The Syce leapt nimbly up onto the back seat and quickly I drove away from the anxious figure on the porch. I was literally scared to death as I turned the horse's head out of the grasslands onto the jungle track which led the few miles to the Jacksons' bungalow. Wild beasts, the fury of the storm, the possibility of having to bring a baby into the world, for I knew the doctor was away taking a patient to Calcutta, what a program I thought to myself uneasily, as I brushed the torrential rain out of my eyes. I had covered my head with a light rubber spongebag I used for toilet articles when traveling, and a penetrating smell of nail polish remover became more and more apparent as my hair warmed up under the tightness of my novel headgear.

Gertrude, it must be explained, though she was only a horse, was really a perfect lady. Her original master had passed her on to a friend when he retired, and the friend passed her on to somebody else when he was transferred, and then she came to us and we had

given her to the Jacksons. In this way she had grown to maturity in a variety of stables. Having been handed around to such an extent, she knew every nook and cranny of the district blindfolded. Above all else she was steady as a rock. Other horses bolted or stood on their heads when they encountered a wild beast, but not Gertrude. She plodded on regardless of her surroundings until she reached her appointed destination.

In every character, however, there are flaws, and Gertrude was no exception, as I realized when we were about a mile from the end of our journey.

I had tried to keep up my courage by singing at the top of my voice, and was almost beginning to feel that we had made it, when suddenly an enormous wild pig charged out of the grass just in front of us and disappeared with a loud snort in the darkness on the opposite side of the road. Whether Gertrude was affected by my nervousness or the loud snort I never knew, but without a word of warning she kicked up her heels and bolted like a two-year-old.

I could only hang onto the reins and hope for the best. Missing the gatepost by inches as we tore into the driveway we came to a sudden and terrifying halt at the foot of the verandah steps, which pitched me head first from the buggy into a large mass of hydrangea bushes growing alongside. "This is a fine way for the obstetrician to arrive," I said to myself hysterically as I struggled to my feet, large rivulets of water trickling down my back from the sodden foliage which had fortunately broken my fall.

Roy Jackson came hurrying onto the verandah from the bedroom, his hair on end and a wild look in his eye. "Oh, what shall we do?" He was in a perfect state of frenzy, being at the best of times a highly excitable man. "The doctor won't be back till tomorrow, and the nurse wasn't to come for another three weeks."

"We'll manage all right," I answered cheerfully, as if to deliver babies in the heart of the jungle unaided was as simple to me as washing my hair. "Do calm yourself for a start, anyhow. Babies are being born every day, after all."

"But you don't know anything about it, and I don't. . . . I can't bear it if anything should happen to her."

"Now look here," I said firmly, restraining a strong desire to slap

him soundly for hauling me out of bed if he thought so poorly of my capabilities, "just pull yourself together and lend me a hand."

"Oh, I couldn't!" He was horrified beyond words. "I simply couldn't!"

"I don't mean with your wife," I said irritably. "For heaven's sake, be sensible. Go and see that there are gallons and gallons of hot water, and tell the boy to make some coffee or tea or both . . . I'm soaked through."

"She is in such pain," he blithered on. "I simply can't bear it . . . it will kill me!"

"You don't have to bear it," I retorted coldly, "and it's not likely to kill you. Please go and see about the hot water and so on and leave your wife to me."

I went into the bedroom where the patient was lying on her bed, quietly weeping. I remembered my own day and the odious Miss Savage. I could at least spare her all I went through at the hands of that unmerciful woman.

"Hello, Margaret," I said cheerfully, "this is great—getting it all over three weeks ahead of time."

"I'm so very sorry," she wept, "but I wanted you so badly."

"Don't be sorry," I comforted. "You have no idea what a thrill it is when you see the baby."

"I wish the doctor would come," she said miserably. "I hate you to have to be alone."

"Never mind," I replied. "Just tell me where everything is, and then I'll help you take a hot bath."

"I'm afraid none of the things I ordered have arrived," she said. "I only have the baby's clothes."

This set me back when I remembered the long list of things I had been told to have on hand for the day. However, if there were no rubber sheets, gauze, cotton, sterilized this-and-that, we would just have to go without and keep our fingers crossed.

Mr. Jackson arrived at the door looking like a hunted rabbit, with a tray of tea and coffee. "Is she all right?" he whispered, as I took the tray from him.

"Look here," I laughed, "she is going to be perfectly all right and it may be some hours yet, so don't keep asking how she is."

"I've sent my assistant to wait at the doctor's bungalow for his return," said the miserable man, "and I wired again to see if we can get a nurse."

"That's fine. But it will take two days for a nurse to arrive and the doctor may not get back, so let's face it, and just have faith," I admonished. "I'll do everything I can."

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked with a little more confidence.

"Yes," I said. "Why don't you go down to the factory and put in some overtime? I will send for you at once if I need you."

This, fortunately, he agreed to do as the factory was working all night, and I was heartily relieved to see the last of him.

While Margaret was in the bath, I took a quick look in the baby book, but I was so appalled at the awful possibilities with which we were confronted that I pitched the book into the laundry basket and shut down the lid tight. Everything had to be all right, but I was truly frightened at the thought of what the next few hours might bring forth. If only Ted could be spirited to my side on a magic carpet, or Dr. Chanda, or Lilla, who had had ten children of her own. I wished I had brought her with me.

The patient was wonderfully cooperative, but as full morning followed the dawn and we seemed to be getting nowhere, her spirits began to droop as the pains increased.

I remembered that there was some mysterious process known as tying the cord, for which sterilized thread was required. Though I hunted high and low, I could find no sewing silk, thread, or string, or anything that would tie anything under any circumstances. I could find only artist's materials and dozens of gun shells. Suddenly I recollected that I was wearing a slip that was adorned with blue ribbons at the hem. I quickly removed the ribbons and put them to boil on the spirit stove that I had brought into the bathroom.

I strained my ears continually, and in vain, for any sound of horse's hoofs that might indicate the arrival of the doctor. I had thought of every funny story I had ever heard in my life and told them to Margaret as I held her hand, or massaged her back, when the pains were worst. We had played all the phonograph records over and over, considered and rejected every known name for both

girls and boys. We had drunk endless tea and coffee and she had taken four baths, announcing in each that she was going to die the next moment, but we both lived on.

About two o'clock in the afternoon I realized from my own experience that the final crisis was not far away and a sudden wave of appalling apprehension gripped me by the throat. It was not helped by the almost complete collapse of the weary and overwrought husband on the verandah. Quickly I penned a note to George asking him to keep Roy until I sent for him, then I gave the note to Roy and told him it was urgent and absolutely imperative that he deliver it to George at once. Fortunately he was still balanced enough to understand and agree to do as I asked. I was dead tired physically and mentally and the humidity and intense heat only exaggerated the trials and tribulations of the occasion. I returned to Margaret from the verandah and my heart sank as I noticed her increasing pallor and utter weariness. Vigorously I tried to lift her almost non-existing spirits. I spied in the corner a series of hatboxes, and knowing how ridiculous one looks in other people's hats I took off the lids and one after another I perched the miscellaneous collection of millinery at rakish angles on my head. We did manage to have a few good laughs in spite of everything, and just as I was fixing a most fetching little flowered creation in position on the side of my head, everything seemed to happen at once. Margaret stifled a terrible scream with her pillow and I rushed to her bedside, the baby appeared and began to yell lustily which was music to my ears, and the doctor walked hurriedly into the room complete with black bag. He took one astonished look at me, the hat, the perspiration rolling down my face in huge beads, and quickly turned his attention to the mother and child.

It was a glorious and triumphant finale, as we bathed and weighed, dressed, and waxed enthusiastic over the perfect little girl. Margaret was radiant in spite of her suffering. Quickly we dispatched a messenger to George telling him the good news. As the doctor and I finally withdrew onto the verandah he took my arm and gripped it till I almost winced. He was grinning happily all over his kindly face. "I really can't express myself, but oh Lord, am I relieved." He was mopping his forehead with his handkerchief.

"You're relieved," I laughed a little hysterically, "why listen to the man!"

"Yes, my dear," his face was quite serious all of a sudden, "but there is something you don't know, and I'm glad you didn't. I had staked my professional reputation on the fact that it would be impossible for Mrs. Jackson to deliver herself normally. Her measurements are short and I had arranged with the Civil Surgeon in Razpur to time his inspection of the plantation here to coincide with the baby's due date so that he would be available to give me a hand with a Caesarian."

I simply stared at the doctor with my mouth wide open.

Chapter 25

THE APPROACH of the cool season each year with its clear crisp mornings and sharply-etched sunsets against the snows was always a time of rejoicing and relief. Gone for five months was the enervating heat, the suffocating humidity and the endless rain. In its place we had the lovely days of planting our garden with the wide variety of flower and vegetable seeds, the Sunday picnics in the bamboo grove, the fishing expeditions in the small bubbling river that ran alongside the paddock, supper around the huge log fire, and over all the perpetual and enchanting smell of tea wood smouldering. It was a unique, pungent perfume peculiar to the season of the year when the tea bushes were pruned and the old wood burnt in small heaps beside the roads that run all along the different numbers. Over the last cool season, however, that we were to spend all together, there hung a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. Elizabeth was almost seven years old and at the end of the cold season we had to face the prospect of taking her home to England to school, and the dreaded break in our family life.

She was to have a real celebration for her birthday this last year with us, for besides little Sandra Jackson there were now four other children in the district, due to various changes at neighboring plantations. George had arranged for an elephant to take the children for rides in the garden and we had sent to Calcutta for a shipment of balloons, colored paper streamers, hats, table napkins, and gifts and toys for all. But as I unpacked the parcels after Elizabeth was safely asleep my heart was like lead. George and I spoke little of the subject to each other as he realized only too well the bitterness that was bound up in this tragic phase of life in the Orient for the white man. I realized also that it was no different for me than for any other mother in similar circumstances but this did not help me in the slightest. As I watched George and Elizabeth together, I kept

saying to myself, "This is the last time life will be like this for us," and my heart seemed to turn to stone inside me. I could not imagine what it would be like without a child around the house, with no joyous laughter and no ceaseless care.

To Elizabeth we forced ourselves to speak of the coming change as often as we could bring ourselves to do it. Always she would stare silently at us for a few moments and then say quietly, "But I don't want you to leave me anywhere. I belong here."

In vain I would point out the joys of school, companions of her own age, no long hot seasons nor tiresome mosquito boots, but the effect was always the same. She refused to contemplate such an unbelievable prospect as being without us, and the whole situation tore us to pieces.

As she came in from the garden one morning, leaving George to contemplate some patches of dead grass on the tennis court, she clasped tightly in her hand a little bunch of flowers grown in her own small corner. As usual, with the greatest of care she put them in a vase on my writing desk.

Turning to me, she threw her arms around my neck and cuddled against my shoulder. "These are all for you, Mummy darling," she said, "and next cold weather I'm going to have a rose bush of my own. I told Daddy so!"

Next cold weather! I groaned inwardly.

"What did Daddy say?" I asked, determined to know how he was handling the situation.

"He just grunted, Mummy," she laughed. "You know his 'not sure' sort of grunts. But I am. I promised myself so."

The tears rushed to my eyes and I walked quickly out onto the verandah and fastened my gaze on the snows in the distance. I must hang on to the now, I told myself vehemently.

In every letter I poured out my woe and despondency to Father, always sure of a ready understanding from him. Only the day before he had written me four pages of uplifting and inspiring thoughts from his own wealth of experience.

"When you come to a blank wall, my child," he had ended his letter, "never fail to remember this . . . if you look carefully, there is always a little door in it somewhere." So I endeavored to put on

my rose-colored spectacles during the weeks that followed, and search diligently for my little door.

I had promised to lend all Elizabeth's toys and furniture to little Sandra Jackson. We could not bring ourselves to sell or give them away. I hoped most fervently that one day we might have another little owner ourselves, with dancing grey eyes and a deep gurgling laugh. The fact that for some unexplained reason I had suffered a miscarriage a few months previously only added to the unhappiness of the present situation.

The day of departure came only too fast and was a sickening and torturing experience. A fond farewell was taken of every nook and cranny by Elizabeth. Every individual animal was clasped and caressed most tenderly with strict admonitions as to its future behaviour. "Remember," was her final instruction, "I shan't be so long . . . I'll come back again, so don't fret."

Tears were streaming unashamedly down Abdul's cheeks as he packed the Thermos jugs and the spirit stove into the back of the car. Lilla was quietly weeping in the nursery, unable to bring herself at the last to come to the verandah steps for one last long loving embrace. There had been too many of them already. I was almost completely undone myself. I hardly knew what I was about, and George, biting hard at the stem of his empty pipe, was the only one who was quietly and methodically superintending the last minute tasks for the journey.

Abdul was remaining on with our relief manager to help keep an eye on everything during our absence and Lilla was going to Shillong for a holiday. She was to return to us later as my personal maid for I could not bear to part with her, nor she with me.

The reunion with the family at Brigner lifted our spirits for the time being. Elizabeth had not really forgotten one of them and in her enchantment at the spoiling showered on her by grandparents and uncles, poor Toto her beloved Teddy bear was reduced to a grisly loneliness, standing for weeks on his head at the bottom of a bedroom cupboard.

Everyone in the family did his level best to make the summer a halcyon experience for us. Behind all, for me, stood George, unruffled on the surface, but moved, I knew, to the depths by the

same strong currents of emotion, which gripped me by the throat with increasing frequency as the weeks rolled by, and drove me to seek the comforting shelter of his arms in many still hours before the dawn.

We spent the last few weeks looking through endless booklets of various schools situated not too far from my parents, and we visited each in rotation. We did not find one that we really liked until just before George had to leave.

He was to return to Assam in September. He wanted me to remain in England an extra three months, and see Elizabeth safely settled in school. He felt that that was only fair to her.

It was a small nursery school, nestling among pine trees, about thirty miles from my home, run by an understanding Scotch woman and her English partner. There were several children there whose parents were in India, which we thought would be a distinct help to Elizabeth.

We felt that it was too much of a burden for my parents to have Elizabeth entirely with them, but they were to visit her once a month, and have her with them during all the holidays.

Every so often during these last few weeks, Elizabeth would leave her play with the other children on the sands and come running to me with the same question. "How many more days before you go away, Mummy darling?"

"Oh, quite a long time, yet, my sweet," I would answer. "I am going to wait a little with you, you know, after Daddy leaves." Always I felt she clung to the hope that somehow or other this thing would never come to pass.

Ted arrived on leave early in August and between post-graduate courses at various London hospitals he spent his weekends with us. He had formed an enormous regard for my family and they in turn found him irresistible. He almost wore out the seat of his trousers taking Elizabeth for pony rides on the sands every day. Her cup of happiness was full to overflowing when the buckle on his bathing shorts gave way one day in the sea, and he had to remain in the water while she came running to the house, almost hysterical with laughter, to borrow a safety-pin from Mummy's work basket.

The days ran on with awful speed. As George clasped Elizabeth in his arms in a long and tender embrace on the morning of his

departure his tears, for which even the strongest man must be forgiven at times, could no longer be restrained. In dumb agony we drove the forty-odd miles to London to catch the boat train, though he had begged me not to go to the station to see him off.

"Don't worry about me, darling, will you?" he said as the whistle blew and we clung together for one brief final moment. "Everything will be all right."

"Oh George," I sobbed openly, "George darling. . . ." I could find no words to say and the next minute he was gone.

As I stood in a daze watching the train slowly disappear, I suddenly felt a strong grip on my elbow and turning I looked into Ted's smiling face.

"I meant to make the train, my dear," he said gently, "but I was delayed at the hospital."

"Oh, Ted," I choked. "I . . ." No words would come and I fought desperately to regain control of myself in front of the small crowd that seem continually to haunt all station platforms.

"I know," he said, squeezing my arm gently. "Well, we're going to have some lunch now and I've got two tickets for the new show at the Alhambra, after which I propose to drive you home, if you think your mother will keep me for the weekend."

"Of course she will," I tried to smile. "There will always be a place for you in our house, as you well know."

The lovely lunch was wasted on me and I saw little and heard less of the show. George had gone, and before I would see him again I would have to part with Elizabeth. The stiffest fight of my life lay a short distance ahead of me, and I did not know how I was ever going to see it through. Neither the thought of past victories nor future happiness served in the slightest to lift me out of the slough of despair into which I had fallen.

As Ted and I sat on the sands in the twilight after our return from London, we watched a pack of children splashing about in the water and enjoying their final hour before bedtime.

"Ted," I said in desperation, "I don't know how I'm going to face it . . . I just don't."

He sighed deeply as he searched his pocket for his cigarette case. "I understand, my dear," he said, "perfectly. It is the most sickening situation on earth. The worst part of it is the fact that only you

can decide if you are going to leave your child or give up your husband."

He had read my mind, and knew my agony.

"A wrenching choice, in any case," I replied.

"Well, Monica," he answered slowly, "we all have our tragedies in life. Perhaps the time has come when it might help you to know mine." I looked quickly at him.

I always had known there was something. I had been more and more certain of it as the years had passed.

Briefly, and with many pauses, he told me of the girl he had fallen in love with in his hospital training days. Of her love for him and her determination to wait for him until he was fully qualified. The wedding day at last was set, everything arranged, and then on the very eve of the wedding she had contracted pneumonia and in three days she was dead.

I could find no appropriate words with which to express my feelings for him. There was a long and poignant silence during which I slipped my hand gently through his arm.

"I'm terribly sorry, Ted," I said at last. "You should have told us long ago."

He made no reply and we sat on in the gathering dusk, each busy with his own thoughts.

"I never felt," he said at length, "that I could ever risk even a second best—especially in a place like Assam. I couldn't have faced a failure—my Chris had meant too much to me."

"Oh, life is too hard at times," I answered bitterly. "I wonder every now and again why we ever bother with it at all."

"We have to bother, my dear girl." He spoke quietly and there was no trace of the bitterness with which I was consumed. "That is if we are to amount to anything at all. In time I reached a point of acceptance in my work out there. I've had my little flutters once in a while here and there but they have never amounted to anything because I always realized it must be the real thing or nothing. I think I am pretty fortunate to be so content to bask in the happiness which your family life radiates," he smiled quickly, "believe me it means a great deal and helps me not to go sour. Maybe I'm wrong but I'd rather have things the way they are than make a mistake."

"Ted," I sighed, somewhat abashed, "you make me feel very selfish. And we so love to have you around."

George sent me a cable from every port and his second letter written from Calcutta contained news that would have been, at any other time, wildly exciting. He had been informed at the office that word had come from the Directors that we were to be transferred once again to a plantation in the very heart of civilization, as civilization went in Assam.

Though only about twelve miles across a stretch of jungle from our first home beside the river, this plantation was situated beside the oil fields at Teensung, and on the main railway and direct road to Dibrugarh. There was quite a large English colony at Teensung, and our bungalow was being equipped with electric lights and fans. Even this vision of luxury failed to stir me more than just a very little, although I was delighted at the further promotion for George to a plantation of nearly two thousand acres.

"I am so thankful," he wrote, "that you will not have to go back to any old associations, darling. There will be heaps for you to do here all the time." As ever, his thoughts were for me and I felt guilty at my entire lack of enthusiasm over the whole prospect.

Relentlessly the days sped by. Every morning I awakened with the vague feeling that something unpleasant was pending of which I was not fully conscious until the full light of day dawned.

Childlike, Elizabeth was taken up with the things of the moment, and with full feminine vanity she gloried in the fine new wardrobe that I had gradually collected for her.

"I shan't see her in this," and "I shan't take her out in that," was the theme of my daily musings as I marked each little garment with her own name tab. "Or shall I?" I would ask myself over and over again. "Shall I still be here—unable to leave her at the eleventh hour?" I did not know the answer.

Near the school was a tiny inn and we arranged that I should take Elizabeth over and stay there for a fortnight or so before I was to sail so that she might go daily to school for the first few days and spend the two weekends as a boarder, only visiting me in the afternoons.

Things went fairly well to begin with, but when the first week-

end came around, she cried herself sick and was kept in school only by sheer force. Desperately I spent the time walking the woods and downs, railing against fate. It was as much as I could do not to exclaim out loud at the sight of the wan little creature who was returned to spend the final few days before my departure. While trying to eat her supper before the fire, she suddenly burst into tears and threw herself into my arms.

"Oh, Mummy," she sobbed, "I wish you had never married Daddy, then you would not have to leave me."

Frantically I tried to console her, but the words turned to ashes in my mouth. I struggled hard to be calm and matter of fact. I pointed out how much nicer it was to have lovely woods to play in, free from the fear of snakes and wild animals, that Granny and Grandpa were quite near and would see her often, and that I must go back and take care of Daddy and everything in the bungalow. But it was all in vain. She eventually cried herself into a troubled sleep and when I went to look at her before going to bed, her flushed face was puckered into an expression of acute distress, and one small arm was curled around the long-neglected Toto. She must have taken him from her suitcase.

The sight of that inanimate, beloved old treasure, forgotten for so long, and sought out in desperation in her hour of suffering, was my undoing. As I looked at the forlorn little sleeper with her tear-dampened hair and swollen eyelids, seeking comfort and consolation from a love of our former life together, I was lost.

"I can't do it," I sobbed aloud. "It's no use—I just can't do it."

With the tears streaming down my cheeks, I sat down at the writing desk and wrote a long letter to George and another to my father. I begged their forgiveness and understanding for my action but I could not bring myself to abandon the child, at least until she was older.

Slipping down to the lounge I mailed the letters in the hotel box, and telephoned a wire to the post office to be delivered to the shipping company in the morning cancelling my passage to Bombay. The decision was made; the long weeks and months of struggling were over; and throwing myself on my bed fully clothed, I slept the sleep of exhaustion.

The following morning I took Elizabeth to school like a lamb to

the slaughter. I told Miss Ross that I was remaining on for a time, but I asked her not to mention it to Elizabeth just then. Somehow I felt like a traitor, and I wanted to go out into the woods to think. Miss Ross looked at me somewhat strangely for a moment, but she made no comment whatever.

As I sat on the fallen tree stump beside the little brook which had been my second home during the preceding days, the picture of George receiving my letter refused to leave my mind. I knew that he would accept my decision with his usual fortitude and courage, but that only made me feel worse. Long years before he had tasted the bitterness of separation and sorrow, and though it was a situation that he, perhaps more than any other man, could appreciate to the full, it would not make it any easier now to have to face it all over again. All that we had built together through the long happy years I had cast to the winds. Deep in my heart I knew that for him the lights would go out when my letter reached him. I buried my head in my arms and wept until I could weep no more.

Early next morning I received Father's reply by express messenger. My hand shook as I signed the grimy ink receipt form and handed it back to the rosy-faced boy who mounted his bicycle and rode whistling off down the road in the pouring rain. I could not bring myself to open the letter at the door of the cozy lounge. Fetching my raincoat from my room I struggled into it and went to my refuge beside the brook.

For some time I looked at the familiar handwriting, without attempting to open the envelope. To fail in his estimation only increased the pain which had been gnawing at me constantly. In the final analysis, I was after all just not as good as I thought I was. I might as well face his quiet censure and get it over with.

In the drenching rain, I braced myself to slit open the now soaking letter. There was nothing but a small brown rabbit on the other side of the brook to share my misery and despair.

MY DARLING CHILD, [he wrote]

Your letter has neither shocked nor horrified me as you suggest. My heart is filled with understanding and pity for you in this cruel situation in which you find yourself. You may not fully realize with what pride and admiration I have watched you stand up so gallantly to everything that you have had to face so far. Had it been otherwise, you must

have cracked up long ago. I have no intention of criticizing you now, but before you make a final decision to remain over here with the child, I want you to ponder quietly a few facts. Remember, first, that life anywhere is one long process of struggling and fighting. It is only thus that we come to full growth and understanding and to fulfil the purpose of our being. Marriage is one of the hardest schools through which we have to pass, learning many severe lessons as we go along. You have known from the beginning that this day had to be faced. You did not marry with the intention of leaving your husband to continue alone if you should be blessed with children. George is not the type of man who can find consolation elsewhere. You are his very life. I want you to take the long view, for feelings unless piloted by reason only drive one crazy. You are too much of an idealist ever to be satisfied for long with anything in the nature of a failure. Can you visualize a future in which you might look back on that harsh word as applicable to yourself? Think it over once again very carefully, and remember that whatever you decide to do I am there behind you, and, as always, you remain the apple of my eye.

YOUR DEVOTED FATHER

The tears rushed to my eyes, and wildly I brushed them aside as I read his letter again. Every word of it was true. I had known all along this day would come. I had not married with the intention of abandoning George if and when this day arrived. I was fully aware that I was his very life. He needed me with every ounce of his being. We supplemented each other in every detail. While he never submerged his personality in mine, he respected and relied on my judgment, and often followed my advice, arrived at, so many times, by entirely illogical reasoning from the male point of view, and yet so often proving to be just the right advice for the particular moment. We belonged and there was no getting away from it. One sentence in Father's letter kept coming to my mind. "You are too much of an idealist ever to be satisfied for long with anything in the nature of a failure." Failure! The word had always been anathema to me. When I set my hand to the plough I dreaded the thought of there being any looking back. I had always prided myself on the fact that when I gave my word I kept it, and here I was at the greatest trial of my life, going back on everything I held most dear.

George needed me now, always, and I needed him. Father and Mother would guard Elizabeth as they had George. Stuffing the

limp and rain-sodden letter into my pocket I fled from the woods. Twenty-four dreadful hours later my mind was made up.

Calling the shipping company in London I inquired if there was any available space on the ship on which I had cancelled my passage.

"No," a polite voice answered, "there is nothing—and nothing for the next three weeks."

The only suggestion that could be made in answer to my urgent entreaties was that if I could catch the night train from London that night and travel across France, I could pick up a berth in the ship that had left London a few days previously, and was due to call at Marseilles the following evening. This proposal I accepted immediately, and writing out a cable to George I asked him to "disregard my letter of the nineteenth" and that I would be arriving a week earlier than arranged. I sent a second telegram to my parents asking them to meet me in London at Victoria Station one hour before the boat train was to leave at ten P.M.

Tearing back to the Inn, I hastily flung my clothes into my trunks. It was then nearly three P.M., and I had been entirely unconscious of the hours spent in the woods, and of the fact that I had hardly had any food to speak of in days.

I phoned Miss Ross and told her of my decision and asked her if I might say goodbye to Elizabeth in her private study in about fifteen minutes.

"Certainly, my dear," the quiet voice came back over the wire, "and, if I may say so . . . you are doing the right thing. We will take the greatest care of Elizabeth. She is a sweet child and so beautifully trained."

With what I felt was the height of extreme brutality, I took Elizabeth in my arms and told her that my ship was sailing a few days earlier than I expected. Bursting into tears, she fastened her little arms behind my neck in a grip that I had forcibly to loosen before I, myself, should be once more and forever lost. Hugging her desperately for one brief final second, I made for the door.

"Mummy, my Mummy . . . don't leave me . . . oh, don't leave me." The cry rang in my ears as I tore down the driveway to the cab that was waiting for me.

In a dream, or was it a nightmare, I made the journey to Lon-

don, collected my tickets, met my parents, said goodbye to them, and finally found myself lying in my cabin in Marseilles harbor.

As we heaved our way through stormy Mediterranean seas, I seemed to be in a state of suspended animation. I dared not think, I hardly dared breathe. As I struggled to dress on the second morning out, my gaze lighted on the photographs of George and Elizabeth, on my dressing table. My heart turned over inside me as I looked at Elizabeth. I could hear that heartbroken cry even in my dreams, and hastily I put the photos down and continued dressing. As I finished my hair I suddenly stood rooted to the spot, comb in hand, for a horrible, grisly thought had wormed its way slowly into my mind.

"Suppose George does not want you back now after your letter?" a nasty voice nagged quietly. That was ridiculous, I told myself firmly. But was it? Is there a man born whose pride is not deeply hurt at the very suggestion of being put aside by the one he loves. I might get a wire in Bombay telling me to go back again and stay with Elizabeth. It could quite easily be. That wasn't like George, though, not in the very least. Still, the finest men have been known to do strange things when wounded to the core. "Well," I said to myself, "let come what may, if anything like that happens you have brought it on yourself." I resolved that for the next ten days I would eat, drink and be merry and to blazes with men and marriage and life in the jungle and everything else.

I joined a group of people who amused themselves thoroughly. I didn't belong in that set and despised myself accordingly, but I could not bear to go anywhere near the passengers who had their children still with them. I played bridge for high stakes and lost far too much. I drank cocktails which I loathe, and suffered acutely as I deserved.

As the coast line of Bombay gradually became clearer in the early evening twilight I leaned on the rails at the bow of the ship, lost in thought. It hardly seemed possible, I mused, that almost ten years had slipped away since my eyes had first fallen on the now familiar scene. Ten years since my wedding morning. How young I had been, how very young and inexperienced! I had traveled far since that day. I had learnt so very much and at times the way had been hard and painful. I was still the same impulsive, sensitive creature,

but I was at least mature now, wiser, more philosophical, more practical. I was also a little broader of shoulder and hip with a tendency to put on weight which was anything but pleasing. I had discovered a few grey hairs amongst my dark curls too, which was discouraging as George hadn't a sign of a grey hair. He hadn't changed at all as far as I could see except for perhaps a few little crinkles around his eyes when he smiled. The thought of him suddenly filled me with a feeling of dread. What should I hear from him in Bombay? Surely he would understand, but still—I shivered as I thought of the blow my letter would have dealt him. I knew he could get no further leave and that I should have to do the trip to Assam alone. As the ship finally tied up alongside I sat down in a deck chair near the lounge to wait the course of events. My heart almost stopped as I saw a steward approaching me with a telegram on a tray. I practically snatched it from him and walked quickly toward the rails. Wrenching it open I prepared myself for the worst. At first the mist in front of my eyes prevented me from distinguishing the words, but at last I read, "Waiting for you . . . counting the hours . . . understand everything perfectly. George." I stood staring into space, the telegram in my hand.

An acquaintance of the voyage stopped beside me and said kindly, "I hope you haven't had bad news, I'm sure."

"Bad news?" I answered somewhat stupidly, and again, "Bad news? Oh, no, no, thank you very much. . . . I have had good news, wonderful news, the very best possible news in the whole wide world!"

Chapter 26

PERHAPS FOR the first time in my life, during the weeks that followed my return I learned the true meaning of gratitude, and the wisdom of counting one's blessings, literally one by one.

In the blank wall that had previously confronted me several doors had opened. While the bitterness of the separation from Elizabeth overwhelmed me at times, I still had almost a feeling of elation that carried me along with a song in my heart. Perhaps at last I was the master of my fate if not quite the captain of my soul. I was deeply thankful to see the somewhat drawn and anxious expression disappear from George's face soon after our reunion, and never once did he refer to my letter. Men are so generous in comparison with women. When a thing is over and done with, it's over and done with. There is no digging up, no constant reference to the past.

The heartwarming reception I received from the staff gathered at the garden gate was enough to make anyone glad, and the dogs almost tore me in pieces leaping, barking and rushing around.

Abdul stepped forward bowing, his usually immobile countenance wreathed in smiles, and Lilla could hardly wait to inquire about Elizabeth. "Our little Missy-baba, Mem-sahib," she asked eagerly, "how is she . . . how big is she now?"

"She has grown so, Lilla dear," I answered with an effort, "and she sent all sorts of messages to you all and her very dear love. She is quite tall now." Warm smiles spread over the friendly faces.

Thankful, too, was I, for the cables and letters from my parents and Miss Ross, all telling me how bravely and sincerely Elizabeth was making the effort to settle down and adjust herself to her totally new way of life.

"She is such a courageous little soul," Miss Ross wrote. "She is a joy to us all, so please don't worry about her."

The mantle of dear Julie Turner seemed to have fallen upon me with a vengeance as I sat with the letters in my lap in the privacy of our bedroom, while big tears poured down my cheeks and blurred Elizabeth's childish scrawl. Always her letters started in the same way. "My darling Mummy and Daddy, I hope you are quite well and when are you coming home?"

With all the power at my command I had to thrust the picture of her from my mind and concentrate on the job in hand. There were so many raw places and tormenting memories to be circumvented somehow. The early Sunday mornings were one of the biggest and most trying hurts. That had always been the hour devoted to George's outstanding gift of storytelling. On the first Sunday morning after my return, I was awakened by the rattle of cups and saucers as George placed my tea on the table beside my bed.

"Sunday morning, darling," he said, smiling down at me, "and I don't have to go out so early."

It wasn't a bit what he meant to say and I knew it, as I threw back the covers and made room for him to get into my bed beside me.

"We shall have to invent a new game," I said chokily, as I buried my face in the soft wool pullover he always slipped on during cold weather mornings for the ceremony of early morning tea. The angora fluff had always made me sneeze and this morning was no exception.

George held me close, running his fingers through my hair. "You don't know how good it is to hear that funny little cat noise of yours again," he said.

I was thankful once more that at the eleventh hour, I had not let him down. Elizabeth could never be so utterly alone, surrounded by my family to love and guard her, as had been that gentle little boy, whose tender ministrations to me would be forever woven like a silver thread in my earliest recollections. For a long time we lay in silence and for once it seemed as if my strength was flowing back to him, soothing and comforting him as though he were a child waked from a sudden nightmare.

"Why, our tea is cold," George said abruptly. "I will tell Abdul to make some more."

"Let's drink it cold," I laughed, as I reached for another pillow,

which he tucked beneath my shoulders. "I want to hear something about the plantation. So far I have seen only the social life of this city."

Since my return the previous Monday morning there had been a succession of callers and more callers from Teensung, three miles away and with a white population of over one hundred. We had snatched a brief hour one evening, and George had driven me around the fields after a call on the General Manager and his wife. It was an amazing sight to me to see so many bungalows and so much life all in one place. There was a large Club, a golf course, a swimming pool, and several tennis courts, all built by the Company for their employees, and we were welcomed as new members.

"I am really happy about this transfer," George said, as he passed me a cup of lukewarm tea and settled himself back comfortably to drink his. "It's all new ground, and conditions will be much easier for you."

"And more difficult for you, I suppose," I said, "on a place this size. How big is it exactly?"

"A little short of two thousand acres, but I have four fine assistants."

George told me some of the troubles that would have to be overcome before the plantation could improve its output. His chief difficulty was the labor problem. The oil companies at Teensung paid higher wages, and it was almost impossible to keep workers from leaving the plantation and going to Teensung to work for more money.

"However, I flatter myself that I can handle the labor so that even that difficulty can gradually be overcome," George said confidently and knowing him as I did I felt no great concern regarding any problem that might confront him.

"Look at the time. . . ." I abruptly changed the subject. Our Sunday morning was gone. But we had started a new Sunday morning tradition. Thenceforth it became a general discussion morning—and I saved up various pieces of information especially for that day.

We also talked particularly of Elizabeth and schooled ourselves to fill the blank with everything about her that made us glad in the weekly letters from home and the not-infrequent cables.

There was so much to do all the time that for many weeks I was in a daze. The civilized existence which was our daily round had been outside my wildest dreams. The chief excitement to me was the joy of electric fans and lights, modern plumbing and a refrigerator.

The cook and Abdul were still speechless at the idea of pressing a switch and getting lights, and opening the door of a cupboard and finding ice made all ready. It was beyond their understanding, and they half believed some spirits entirely unknown to them were responsible.

The bungalow was much the same as all the others, and the garden, though it had endless flower beds of a sort, had never been used for flowers. George had done a wonderful job of weed clearing and general preparation for me, and it was not long before I was putting in sweet peas and hollyhocks.

There was a fine tennis court and we soon started a weekly tennis day at which there were always far too many guests for everyone to play much tennis, so we supplemented the court with a putting green in another corner of the large garden.

The house was never empty, and it gave us no end of pleasure to have all and sundry spend their leisure hours with us whenever they felt so inclined.

George had displayed what I considered a masterly strategy getting all the animals transported to our new home. He had subtly arranged to precede Abdul and the other servants by two days, leaving them to superintend the transfer of our private zoo which they accomplished with perfect results with the exception of Hercules who had just quietly disappeared overnight from the paddock, and had not been seen again.

It took me many mornings riding round the plantation with George before I finally mastered the geography of the place. The railway line from Ledo to Dibrugarh ran straight through the plantation, half of which lay on one side of the track and half on the other. A road ran parallel with the track all the way; the lovely snow-capped Himalayas bounded the eastern horizon, the Naga Hills the north and west.

We had been made honorary members of the large club in Teen-sung, and the committee in charge of amusements saw to it that

there was always plenty going on to keep its members occupied in their spare time. Each Saturday in the cold weather there was a dance in the ballroom of the clubhouse. Every Sunday night there was a movie in the same room, which was the highlight of the week. Always there were some earnest bridge players in the evenings, while golf, swimming in the large pool and tennis filled the needs of sport lovers.

There were about twenty or more British women in the community and secretly I was always amazed to hear some of them grumble about "life in the jungle," as they called it. If only they knew what life in the jungle really meant, alone with yourself and the silence and the wild animals.

While there were plenty of animals in the jungle all around us, they hardly ever ventured out into the open spaces. Our worst foes on the plantation were snakes, of which there were an abundance, particularly cobras. George had warned me always to keep one eye cocked when I was working in the garden. This I did with a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach, for hardly a week went by that a shout did not go up from the Malis as they rushed for long bamboos and whacked an evil-looking, spitting, writhing snake as it slithered from one flower bed to another. There was a reward of one rupee for each cobra killed if taken to the office for inspection. It was then destroyed in one of the factory furnaces, for it was not unknown for the same cobra to be retained and presented at the office again the next morning for further reward. It always filled me with a sense of disgust that the glory of my garden should hold within its warm and scented bosom such loathsome instruments of death.

We were only thirty-seven miles from Ted's bungalow along the road to Dibrugarh, and whenever he could get off on Sunday he came to lunch with us. Occasionally when George was not too busy we would go to him. He wrote a weekly letter to Elizabeth and sent her the most fantastic money orders every now and then to buy herself some coveted treasure. He was obviously delighted to have us within easy reach of him and we felt the same way.

Chapter 27

GEORGE WAS READING the mail with his feet up on the fireseat when I returned one early evening from a visit to a charming American woman who lived at Teensung, where her husband was an oil driller. She was one of my best and most entertaining friends.

"Where have you been, darling?" he asked as he got up to kiss me, "it's quite late." He was always restless and unsettled if I wasn't around when his work was finished.

"Just at Virginia Gardiner's for a committee meeting about new curtains and slipcovers for the club." I smiled.

"Quite a hen party, I bet."

"Yes, it was just that," I answered as I sat down by the warm log blaze and spread out my hands. "It was lots of fun though, and I like women anyhow. We're a grand institution."

"Well, there's going to be one more woman around here pretty soon. David McIntyre's been transferred here to help me, and he's bringing his new bride straight from England. Just got the news in the mail tonight."

"David!" Eagerly I took the letter from George. "This is news. I wonder what she's like," I said excitedly. "Why, it must be five years since David last spent a weekend with us."

"I don't think David would pick an unsuitable girl. He has had plenty of experience by this time of our part of the world," George replied complacently. But I was soon to realize that our David had chosen a girl who was to put my love for my sex to the acid test.

George met the evening train about a week later. It was the same smiling, exuberant David who almost fell out of the car in his haste to greet me at the foot of the verandah steps. Behind him came a tiny, slim young girl with a jaunty hat perched on her fair curls, wearing a trimly tailored suit and with a pair of large blue

eyes clouded with an expression bordering on terror. My mind raced back over the years to my own first arrival, the thought of which sent my heart reaching out to her in silent sympathy.

David, excited and joyous over seeing us again, noticed nothing. "I've told Brenda so much about you both," he said gaily. "I think she knows the whole family history."

"I'm glad you aren't starting in the depths of the jungle," I said to the shy young girl who had not uttered a word, but was petting the dogs, her face averted from us.

She looked up with a pale smile. "Just now I don't know . . . quite where I am," she said. "I seem to be in a complete fog." Tears were not far away.

"I know exactly how you feel, my dear," I said reassuringly, "but you'll soon settle down. You must be very tired. We'll have dinner right away so that you can get into your own bungalow and relax a bit."

At dinner David chattered incessantly, reminiscing over this and that of our early days together. He had broadened considerably, and his face had acquired a strength of character which made him almost handsome.

I noticed that Brenda hardly ate anything at all, and she seemed to shrink into her chair every time Abdul approached with a dish. "Poor child," I thought to myself, "how well I know what you are going through."

"By the way," David said, as he vigorously attacked his grilled chicken, "who should we travel out with on the ship but the Turners and their daughters. All send their very best love to you both. They have just come back for a cold weather season and to give the girls a whirl in Shillong . . . fine kids . . . both exactly like their mother."

"How old are they now?" I asked. "I simply can't remember."

"Diane is nineteen and Audrey is eighteen," David replied. "Julie looks rather frail, I thought, but the old man is as spry as ever."

"He was always a marvel of energy," George laughed.

David drained the last drop of coffee from his cup. "Are you very tired, darling?" he said to Brenda across the table.

"A little." She smiled wanly, and as we rose from the table I slipped my hand through her arm.

"Just drop in here whenever you feel like it," I said, "and be sure you let me know at once how I can help you. Your bungalow is only a five-minute walk from here on the other side of the railway line."

"It's wonderful to be here with you," David said, as they were leaving. "Brenda is a lucky girl."

Brenda, I knew, wasn't feeling particularly lucky, as George packed them into their car and ran them over to their own little love nest. I was not at all sure that David had picked a suitable bride, though there had not been much time for forming any real opinion. But I had a feeling that we were in for some anxious days.

I was going across to the kitchen for the daily inspection on the second morning after David had arrived, when I saw him coming in at the front gate, his face perplexed and frowning.

"Hello!" I called. "Do you want me?"

"I should say I do," he said in great agitation. "Could you go over to Brenda? She won't stop crying and she hasn't eaten a thing. I don't know what to do."

"Don't get worked up, David," I replied casually. "It's quite natural. It's bound to take her a little time to settle down. Think of my early days."

"I have often thought of them," he replied slowly, "but you didn't cry like this."

"Didn't I, David?" I smiled. "That's all you know about it."

"Well, you never seemed to. And in any case you didn't want George to stay with you all day. I've simply got to do a job in the factory this morning. George is waiting for me now."

"I'll walk over at once," I said, calling to Abdul to bring my topee. "You get along to the factory and don't worry."

"If she only knew the sort of place we lived in when you were a bride," he said somewhat bitterly. "There is everything here to keep her occupied."

"You can't expect her to realize that in three days, my dear boy," I answered. "Don't be unreasonable."

"I'm not unreasonable, I'm just distracted," he said. "I am afraid that she is just a terribly spoilt child."

"She will be all right, just leave her to me. And David—" I added, as I walked to the gate, "please don't keep telling Brenda what a wonderful sport I was when I came out. It's not strictly accurate—and besides—she'll begin to hate me!"

When I got to the bungalow I found Brenda lying on her bed. Her eyes swollen with weeping, she was a most woebegone little figure. She had gathered up her blonde curls round her head with a blue ribbon and a damp lace handkerchief was clutched tightly in her hand. I sat down on the bed beside her.

"Tell me about it," I said comfortingly. "I am sure I can help."

She burst into a torrent of weeping. "I want to go home," she sobbed. "I want my mother. . . . This is a terrible place."

I knew so well the depths of misery and homesickness into which she had been plunged. "I have been all through this—you know, many years ago!"

She looked at me suspiciously.

"Indeed I have," I smiled, "and I had nobody to turn to."

"It's all so different from what I expected." She began to cry again. "And David is different, too."

"How long have you been married?"

"Three months," she sobbed.

"You love David, don't you?"

"I *hate* him," she cried wildly, "I *hate* him."

Shaken by this unexpected reply, I frantically searched my mind for the right approach.

"I know you don't mean that," I told her quietly. "We all love David. You are just overwrought and upset by the strangeness of everything. You will soon settle down and there is so much to do here. Get dressed now like a good girl," I said firmly, "and come over to my bungalow. I'll show you how things are run." It seemed to me that occupation was what she needed more than anything else at the moment. "Tomorrow I'll take you into Teensung and introduce you to some of the many really nice people who will be so glad to welcome you."

Reluctantly she sat up on the side of the bed. Everywhere suitcases were open and delicious-looking garments were half in and half out of them.

"David has been doing some unpacking for me," she said with a

grimace. "He doesn't know the difference between panties and a brassiere."

"You wouldn't expect him to be an expert yet, would you?" I bantered.

"I don't know what to expect," she whimpered. "He just wants to work all the time now."

"That's his job. He has been on leave for six months, you must remember, and there's work piled up to be done. Now you slip into some clothes and I will have a word with the servants and find out if there is anything you need at the moment for the cook or the house."

She shuddered. "Oh, those dreadful servants, their black faces terrify me."

"Now get this into your head right away, there is nothing to be afraid of; they only want to serve you faithfully, and I have come to love our servants as dearly as if they were our friends, and indeed they are."

She looked at me as if I were crazy, and I walked out of the room and summoned her small staff onto the back verandah. I told them that I knew that they would help the little mem-sahib all they could, that I expected them to do just that, and that I should be around to see that there was as much cooperation as possible. They readily agreed and expressed complete understanding of her homesickness and misery.

For some days we seemed to make progress. I spent every possible minute at Brenda's bungalow, or had her with me. There was more reluctance than enthusiasm over the Hindustani lessons, which I insisted she begin, the domestic arrangements, and the visits to the neighbors. But at least there were fewer tears, she was kept occupied, and I had high hopes that before long she might show more willingness to make an effort at adjustment. But the progress was short-lived. She existed on a diet of tea and bananas, crackers and fruit out of a can. She refused to touch a thing that the cook prepared, and very gradually she began to wear David down with her constant weeping half through the night.

"You will have to be more severe with that girl," George said to me. "David's work is affected. He is irritable and terse with the people on the plantation and it is bound to cause trouble all along."

"I realize it, and we don't want any of that again," I said, "but it's a problem. She will not make an effort. I am doing all I can. Don't forget what I was like."

"That I shall never forget, darling," he smiled. "But you really tried. And remember, you were alone in the jungle."

"I'm afraid she is very spoiled, but she's also very miserable. Do you suppose that she knows of David's youthful escapades out here and is taking it out on him now?"

George shook his head. "No, Monica. I asked him about that the other day. Fortunately David had the sense to tell her all about that before they became engaged and she accepted it because she had fallen in love with him."

"Well, then, if she was big enough to accept that, isn't she all right at heart? We must keep right on trying."

But for the next week she refused to get up at all, and on the seventh day, when David was beside himself and my patience was almost exhausted, I adopted somewhat different and less sympathetic tactics.

"Brenda," I said severely, "I am beginning to think you are too bone-selfish ever to make the effort to pull yourself together. You can't go on like this forever, or for that matter, for very much longer. David is going to pieces rapidly."

"It's such a ghastly place," she wept, "I simply hate it and on top of it all, there seems to be no money in it, and the men work twenty-four hours a day."

"I wish you could have seen the place I was put in," I answered. "There was just the jungle and the river, and the wild animals and the silence. How would you like that?"

"Well, if you were so crazy as to stay there, that was your lookout."

I drew a deep breath and went on with strained patience. "I know that, my dear, but I loved George and I had taken on a job. You love David—I know that—but you are too spoiled to think of him first for a change. You have everything here to make life as pleasant as it can be. I have said to you again and again, give it a year . . . just twelve short months, and then reconsider the whole situation."

"A year! Who wants to give anything a year?" she stormed. "I

think the place is sheer unadulterated hell, and I'd be dead in a year."

"You're not being fair to David."

"But David isn't the same," she wept afresh. "He can be so loving at night and the next morning he gets up and looks at me as if he had never seen me before."

True, I had everything, I mused to myself as I walked home, but I had had to work for it. I flung myself down in a chair on the verandah. I was at my wit's end to know what to do next, and George was obviously becoming more and more irked at the whole situation. I didn't have to wonder for long, for the next afternoon while we were having tea in the garden David came tearing in the gate with a face as white as a sheet. Obviously something was far wrong and my heart missed a beat.

"George . . . Monica," he gasped, "this is the end . . . she is threatening to take all of her sleeping pills, what shall I do?"

"Nothing," George said very calmly, "except sit down and have some tea. These threats mean nothing." I bit my lip hard. I wasn't so sure. I remembered in a flash Mrs. Carstairs and her tragic suicide.

David flung himself into a chair and mopped his brow.

"David," George said, handing him a cup of tea which he took with trembling hands, "I have thought this thing over and I suggest that you give her twenty-four hours in which to either make up her mind to stay and make a go of it, or to take the next boat home. It's the only thing to do. Any decision now is better than none."

David's teacup rattled in its saucer. He couldn't speak.

"I know it's tough," George went on, "but things can't go on like this any longer."

"I can't tell her that," David said. He looked utterly down and out and I turned my head away quickly. "Monica, will you?" he begged.

"All right, David," I said. "You stay here with George. I'll have another shot at it but it's the last—I can do no more."

Brenda was lying on a sofa on the verandah and I walked up the steps and sat down beside her. She didn't look at me.

"Brenda," I said bluntly, "the time has come now when you are to make up your mind in twenty-four hours whether you are going

to stay or whether you will take the next boat home. It is up to you to make the decision."

Her eyes met mine. "And whose suggestion is that?" The voice was scornful.

"George's. And David agreed. And so do I," I answered flatly. She looked at me in angry astonishment. "Brenda," I said suddenly, I had no idea where the words came from, it had never been my habit to preach, but the moment was urgent. "Do you know the meaning of that part of the promise in the marriage ceremony where we use the word 'cherish'?" She refused to answer. "I think it's such a lovely word," I continued. "I once looked it up in the dictionary and it means to aid and protect . . . to treat with tenderness . . . to encourage and to hold dear."

"Well, what of it?" she said defiantly.

"Think those words over for awhile. You promised to cherish David not so very long ago, as well as to love him. I can almost tell at a glance whether a man is well cherished or not. He has a certain contented bearing, an air of calm and assurance. No man who is well cherished will ever stray very far from the fold. He is more likely to be picked up for speeding as he dashes home each day, sure of a warmth and tenderness that go much farther than the great moments of loving."

She said nothing but her lips were trembling.

"Yes, I mean every word of what I am saying," I went on. "It takes hard work and a lot of unselfishness to keep a man well cherished. It means far more than seeing he is properly fed and that his buttons are sewed on."

She smiled a wan smile.

"It means being a bulwark for him against himself, a protector of his vanity and hurt feelings, a helper in moments of weakness and despondency. In short, it means being the very core and center of his being, the one person of whom he is absolutely sure in an uncertain world. A man needs all this, my dear, however strong he may appear to be, and to my way of thinking, the lovely word 'cherishing' covers the whole subject as no other word can. And oh, Brenda, my dear, it's so very, very worth while."

She looked away from me in silence.

"Before you make your decision, Brenda," I said, rising to go, "be

very sure that you are not going to let the chance of being a good cherisher slip through your fingers right at the start. It's not worth the risk."

Without another word I picked up my topee and walked down the steps and out of the gate. I fully realized that a climax had been reached in the whole miserable situation. We had all done our best, it was up to her now to make her choice.

David and George were standing at the door of the factory as I approached but I purposely walked in the back gate. I felt I simply could not endure to see the dumb misery in David's eyes any more.

Sleep deserted me for most of the night and I could hardly bear to drag through the hours which must bring a decision so momentous to us all. But as I stood on the verandah before breakfast next morning waiting for George to come in from the office, I saw David's mali coming in our gate with a note. "This is it," I said to myself as I took the envelope from the man's grubby hand. My own shook as I tore open the paper, and the words were for a moment blurred in front of my eyes. I took a deep breath and read the penciled scrawl: "I have decided to have a stab at it. Brenda."

Chapter 28

IT WAS JUST over a year after my return from home that the family circle was enlarged by the arrival of another lovely little daughter, which wonderful event took place this time in Ted's bungalow without any untoward disturbance of plans. She turned the scales at ten pounds and was said to be exactly like me. The only cloud was that Elizabeth was so far away and unable to see her small sister, though I was rather afraid that the difference in their ages would preclude the close companionship that children nearer together inevitably enjoy. We spanned the distance as best we could with many photographs and the most detailed correspondence. We chose the name of Rosemary for the baby.

When she was a few months old we were considering the acceleration of our leave so that the family could meet their new grandchild. But before we could make our plans, like a bolt from the blue a cable came informing us of Father's sudden death. The news was a tragic blow in the midst of our new happiness, and for some weeks I had great difficulty in fighting off the sense of grief and loss that engulfed me. It was Mother's bravery that set me an example I strived to follow. She never ceased in her letters to point out the great blessing that had been ours in having such a husband and father who would always be with us as a beloved and cherished inspiration. She also dwelt on the fact that it was the greatest comfort to her to have Elizabeth with her during the holidays.

When George suggested one morning that it would be helpful to carry out a plan we had often had of going up to the Tibet border to fish for Mahseer, the Indian equivalent of salmon, I jumped at the idea. "But Rosemary?" I asked suddenly. "We couldn't take her to a wild spot like that."

"No, but don't you think Ted would like to have her? We can send her with Lilla. Why not write and ask him?"

"It's an excellent idea," I replied. "I know Ted will love having her. Where are you thinking of going—to Paya?"

Paya was on the border of Tibet, where the blue waters of the little Lohit River flowed past the centuries-old monasteries of Tibet before they finally joined the yellow currents of the mighty Brahmaputra. It was a wonderful spot for Mahseer fishing, and I could see that George in imagination was already grappling with a lively forty-five-pounder.

"Paya strikes me as the place to go—if you don't feel it's too wild, Monica. It's up to you."

"Paya it shall be. I'll write to Ted at once—if you'll write to the Political Officer for passes."

A fishing trip to that region was not to be lightly entered on, and could at that time be made only with official permission of the Political Officer in charge of the frontier outposts. The region is inhabited by the wild Mishmi hill tribes, who are extremely primitive, and do not appreciate the intrusion of the white man into their country.

The Political Officer issued passes to the region, and granted permission to use the resthouses, but only if the traveler would guarantee not to go beyond the last settled post into tribal territory, and that he would keep to his resthouse after dusk.

The Political Officer obliged by return mail with passes to stay at Paya. Ted wrote that he'd be delighted to have Rosemary and Lilla, and we began in earnest our preparations for the trip. The resthouse provided only beds, chairs, and tables, and we packed stores, bedding and fishing equipment into the Ford to last out the trip. Abdul and the cook were going with us, and special boatmen were hired who knew the Lohit River and its rapids.

A few days later we left Lilla and Rosemary at Ted's bungalow and proceeded to Sadiya. There we drove the car onto the small wooden ferry that took us across the wide Brahmaputra River, on the other side of which was a drive of twenty-five miles through the jungle to Paya.

The snows were magnificent against an azure sky, the warm sunshine was tempered by a cool November breeze, and as we drove deeper into the quiet jungle trail that led to the resthouse, gorgeous

birds of every imaginable size and color darted in and out among the trees.

We decided to spend the first afternoon lazing by the river, which was about a mile beyond the resthouse, leaving Abdul and the cook to unpack our belongings and get things organized.

The boatmen were waiting for us with a wonderfully roomy dug-out more conducive to sleeping, I thought, than fishing. We had them pole us across the narrow blue sheet of water to a sandbank on the other side, where we tied up, and then stretched ourselves out on the sand.

"I don't believe fishing could ever be so attractive in anything but lovely surroundings," I said to George. "I should hate to fish in an ugly place."

"I absolutely agree," he grunted comfortably. "And this is a sportsman's paradise. Look at the tracks on this sandbank."

Right where we were lying were recent pug marks of tiger, leopard, buffalo, elephant, deer and pig. I realized some of these, no doubt, were quietly watching us from the depths of their cool green jungle haunts, wondering what this strange scent could be that was wafted to them on the breeze, but by this time I had seen too many of them to be greatly disturbed.

We had not applied for the special license necessary for big-game hunting, as we had no suitable rifle for such sport, and George did not care for women around when he went in for any sort of risky adventures such as hunting big game, a pastime he had not indulged in since his bachelor days. From that time on we always seemed to have had enough of the species on our own front doorstep without going out to hunt for them.

For the first three days, though we covered large stretches of the river in perfect weather, we did not have a single strike. For myself I did not mind, for I was not particularly in the mood for fishing, but for George it was deeply disappointing.

I was content just to drink in the peace and beauty of our surroundings. The only sounds that broke the stillness were the mellow notes of birds, and every now and then the sound of one deer calling to another in the green jungle on both banks of the river. Clusters of bluish pink orchids hung from the giant trees almost down to the water's edge.

The last four days of our trip made up with a vengeance for what the first three had lacked as far as fishing was concerned. Sport was fast and furious. We supplied the boatmen, the resthouse janitor, Abdul and the cook, to say nothing of ourselves, with more fish than we could eat in a week. George's skill and enthusiasm reached a climax on the last afternoon when he hauled in a forty-five-pound Mahseer after a long and arduous struggle. We had selected a shady spot on a sand bank to eat our midday sandwiches, only to find that I was sitting almost on top of the fresh tracks of a tiger which looked too horribly new for safety when we investigated closely.

"I think we'd better move down the river a bit," George said as he examined the pug marks. "That's a big beast, it must have been here within the last hour or two."

"Let's eat our sandwiches in the boat," I suggested hastily. "The boatman can pole us down to the rapids and then we can start to fish below there. We will have finished eating by the time we get there."

"Good idea," George laughed. "If we stay here the tiger may finish eating first!"

Our lunch consumed and the rapids negotiated, George had barely made a superb cast when he had a sudden strike that bent his rod almost double, nearly pulling him into the water at the same time. Yards and yards of line and a brand new plug bait went humming down the river with a noise like a sewing machine and the fight was on. For the next forty minutes the atmosphere was tense with excitement while the huge fish jumped first to the right and then to the left of the river, dragging and pulling at the line with all its strength. It seemed impossible to me that the line could hold, so fierce were his struggles. The boatmen were shouting and yelling first in exaltation, then in doubt, then back to the heights of anticipation once more, while George with a grim look of determination on his face played and fought the sporting victim. Slowly and cunningly the boatmen edged the dugout into shallow water and gradually the great hulking fish was drawn in towards the sand bank. Stepping out into the water George finally landed him flat on his enormous stomach on the sand amidst the loud applause of his admiring audience.

We invited the boatmen to pack into the car and come with us to the resthouse when we returned late in the afternoon. The cook, brandishing a knife large enough to dismember a whale, gleefully cut up our prize, and the light in Abdul's eyes told me that he was already more than halfway through his beloved curried concoction. The resthouse cat walked around the little group, sniffing lustily, tail in air, so that a good time was had by all.

On the last afternoon of our vacation our fishing luck held out and we started back to the resthouse with enough fish to leave the boatmen for the next week.

Driving slowly along the jungle trail, tired but triumphant, we saw in the distance, coming towards us, a little band of Mishmi tribesmen. Some of the more venturesome of them paid periodical visits to Sadiya, taking musk and skins which they traded for salt and tea or anything that took their fancy. In appearance the Mishmis were typically Mongolian with high cheekbones and light-colored skins. They are very wild and shaggy-looking with a shock of unkempt hair, and clothing which consists of a loosely fitting short coat-like garment, and that's about all.

They have a passion for cigarettes, and if they are disposed to be friendly they will stop and look at you hopefully to see if you are coming through with the coveted treasure. If they are not friendly they may throw themselves on their faces in the short undergrowth until you have passed.

The small group approaching us halted at the side of the road as we drew near, obviously ready to receive any cigarettes that might be offered.

We stopped the car and got out, and George unloaded his pockets, earning delighted grunts from the dozen or so tribesmen. With them were two young girls, and my attention was caught by the lovely fat baby that one of them carried on her hip. I found myself staring at the baby's round, fat, naked stomach which had the most dreadful-looking protruding navel, which, I knew, in medical parlance, would be termed an umbilical hernia. It stuck out for about two inches, an ugly, mean-looking thing which surely must have caused the little chap extreme discomfort. As I raised my eyes, they met those of the young mother, and there passed between us a look

of mutual understanding that needed no words to make its meaning clear to both of us.

"George," I said, turning quickly to him, "look at that baby's stomach. I must do something about it."

George was alarmed. "Don't touch it, darling," he answered hastily, glancing in the infant's direction. "You simply must not touch it . . . they might resent it deeply, and you know we can't speak a word of their language."

"The mother and I understand perfectly," I answered with unwarranted assurance. "Suppose it was Rosemary . . . just wait a moment."

"Do be careful," George said uneasily. "These people are entirely primitive . . . I really think you should leave well enough alone."

"It's not well, though," I persisted. "I'll have a go first with signs and things . . . don't be alarmed—they won't hurt us."

Approaching closer to the Mishmis, who were watching us intently, I pointed to the baby's stomach and then to myself. Then I held out my arms to see if there was any possibility of being allowed to take the child. The mother said something to the others, and smiled at me. The men grunted and wagged their shaggy heads in approval.

"Obviously they are quite friendly," I said to George. "The question is, what on earth can we do on the rim of the world like this?"

George was patently ill at ease, but I was determined to do what I could. Suddenly I remembered having seen Father take care of a smaller hernia by binding it back into the navel, but I had neither pad nor bandage. Looking in my purse I found a small metal compact that had been sent to me as a gift from America, from which I broke off the lid. Then I disappeared behind the car and ripped several inches off the bottom of my slip, which was all I could think of for bandaging purposes.

Once more I went through all the signs of what I intended to do. There was obvious agreement and satisfaction among the strange band, the head-wagging and grunting was all approving. I held out my arms coaxingly to the baby, who willingly came to me, and sitting myself down by the roadside with the infant on my lap, I

gently pressed back the ugly bulge and placed on it the smooth side of the compact which I had padded with a piece of the soft silk from my slip as I was talking to George. Quickly I bound it in place with a strip of the same material. Then giving the babe a hug, I handed him back to his mother. Complete and almost breathless silence had marked the operation, but as the mother reached out her arms for the child, there was a wild shout from the tribesmen who with one accord jumped madly up and down loudly yelling their undisguised delight.

I glanced at George but he had turned away. The infant was now quietly nursing, but as I rose to my feet, it stopped its sucking for a fleeting second and smiled a little half smile at me. The mother's face, too, was wreathed in smiles, and impulsively snatching the little silver earrings from her ears she thrust them into my hands.

George then handed out another round of cigarettes, and as we opened the car door and I got in, there was one loud whoop from the whole party as they turned in the opposite direction and trotted off along the trail, jabbering and shouting.

As we sat before the huge log fire after dinner George browsed through the office mail which he had had sent to us three times during our stay by special messenger from the plantation.

"Anything special?" I asked lazily, putting down my knitting. We had already had letters from Ted telling of the riotous and amusing days he was spending with Rosemary.

"Nothing urgent, anyway, thank goodness." George filled his pipe slowly. "Here's a note from David, just on business, but they send their best love."

We had had Brenda and David with us for only about ten months when David had been sent to manage an unexpected vacancy. Brenda had been making valiant efforts to adjust herself according to her promise. I had managed to teach her enough Hindustani to get by and had helped her start a garden. Other willing neighbours had awakened her interest in golf, tennis and bridge, and it seemed reasonable to hope that she was on the right road.

The mail finished, George came over and sat on the arm of my chair. "Have you enjoyed the trip?" he asked. "Would you like to come up here again sometime?"

"I've loved it," I answered warmly. "I feel fresh and uplifted. I certainly should like to come again, wouldn't you?"

"Indeed I would, and we'll make a point of doing so. And it's the first time I've had you to myself for ages." He rose and gathered up the mail which was scattered over the floor round his chair, tossing the bundle into an open suitcase in the corner of the room. "Next time we come up here," he announced firmly, "I'm not going to have any mail or newspapers sent on at all. We'll forget the world and it can forget us." A slow grin spread over his face as he held out his hands to pull me from the depths of my comfortable chair. "And please remember I said that, will you?"

Chapter 29

THE SEVEN gentle years that followed were the most peaceful and unhindered we had ever known. They were the calm before the devastating storm that was to tear our lives up by the roots.

The plantation improved out of all knowledge. Rosemary's early years were uneventful and happy. She grew into a sturdy little girl and learnt as quickly as Elizabeth had, her first lessons at my knee. The only real sorrow was the inevitable separations that kept the sisters so much apart, between our leaves home. We filled the intervening periods with voluminous correspondence and dozens of photographs. It was easy for Elizabeth to fill in any gaps for herself and the others for she remembered it all so well.

But into the quiet comings and goings in our daily life as season followed season into the late 1930's, we became more and more disturbed by the grumblings of unrest that grew louder and ever louder in Europe, culminating in the Munich Conference of September 1938. And then during the early part of 1939 the unrest suddenly made itself felt on the oil fields of Teensung. Assam was known as the Garden Province of India and except for occasional and temporary labor troubles, usually settled quickly, had remained free of the strife and dissension that so often seemed to disturb other parts of the country.

Now, however, the picture was suddenly changed and early in 1939 a strike was called on the oil fields which was definitely of outside origin. A grilling six months followed, for the first thing the organizers of the strike did was to intimidate all bungalow servants, cooks, house boys, ayahs, washermen, tailors, so that they were afraid for their lives if they dared to go near a bungalow. It was thought by the organization that that would bring the strike to a speedy end. Everyone turned to, however, and did their own work. Gardens grew waist high in grass, the newly built but unopened

hospital was turned into a mess hall for the bachelors, and all through the long hot weather the white population sat out the strike.

It was not till later that the political significance of the whole thing became known. The Japanese were already making their first effort to soften up places which they dreamed they would possess before too long. How long the strike would have continued if war had not been declared by Britain in September 1939 nobody could have told, but with the declaration of war, the oil fields became a key center of military importance and a regiment of the Gurkha Rifles was immediately dispatched to Teensung to take over the fields and break the strike.

With the ending of this ordeal, however, a newer and greater one began. Britain and all our dear ones were now in danger of imminent bombing at any moment. We seemed to have jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

Social life was lived in a rather detached and unenthusiastic sort of fashion and our hearts were heavy with dread. We lived with one ear glued to the radio. The lack of bombing during the first months of the war kept us perpetually on edge wondering what the Nazi strategy was going to be, but all too soon we were to know, as the cruel blitz started and our friends and neighbors began to receive word of the deaths and injuries of their nearest and dearest. Elizabeth was in the country with my family, and all we could do was to pray for their safety, but the sight of a telegraph messenger always turned our hearts to stone.

Through the anguishing days of the fall of France and the Low Countries to the miracle of Dunkerque, we comforted and consoled each other as best we could. Little did we imagine the bombs would be falling on Teensung before so very long.

For reasons that we could not then understand we had been ordered to prepare for a total blackout in the district should the word be given. We bought dozens of yards of the only black cloth available, which smelled to high heaven and was marked "Made in Japan." The idea of a blackout in our faraway part of the world seemed fantastic to us. The only danger to India of invasion had always been thought of as coming through the northwest frontier, not the northeast. Who would ever be able to fly across the treach-

erous mountain ranges that separated Burma from India? As it was impossible for us to go on our usual leaves at the end of 1941 George asked me one afternoon if I would like to take just ten days with him and go back once more to Paya and fish, as we had always promised ourselves we would do one day, and had for various reasons never been able to arrange.

"Suppose we ask Jack Nicholson to go with us?" George said. "He is such a keen fisherman I believe he'd like to have a fight with a good-sized Mahseer."

"I think that's a wonderful idea. He is coming to dinner tonight, let's ask him."

Jack Nicholson was an American who had come to Teensung on a consulting job a few months previously and had become a great friend of ours. George and he had early discovered their mutual love of fishing, and I had sensed that Jack was in some way a lonely soul though it was not until we had known him for some time that we learnt of a domestic separation, mentioned in a few words and never referred to again. He spoke a great deal of his grown son on whom he obviously doted, and of his nephews, sisters and brothers-in-law to whom he was patently much attached. He was more than enthusiastic when the plan was suggested to him in the evening, and so on December 3, 1941, leaving Rosemary with Ted once again, the three of us, plus Abdul, the cook, our equipment and one of my spaniels, set off on the road to Paya. George had not forgotten that he had promised himself this time that no mail or papers should be sent on to us.

Fishing was superb for the first five days, Jack landing several forty-pound Mahseer with the most wonderful skill. George spent a great part of the time simply watching Jack, and I, after losing two quite good catches, decided to give up and take some lessons.

There are certain days in life that stand out in one's memory forever, and the morning of December 11 will be one of those days for me as long as I am alive. We had had a leisurely lunch on a sand bank, during which Jack had been at his gayest. He regaled us with the tallest stories he could think up about the States and was happier than I had ever seen him.

The sun shone on his dark curly hair as he stretched himself to his full six feet on the sand after lunch. "Where shall it be this

afternoon?" he queried. "Upstream or down—or do you just want to take a nap, Monica?" Smiling, he threw a pebble into my lap. I noticed again the attractive lines around his hazel eyes that added to the charm of his smile. Never, I said to myself, would you imagine that he is fifty years of age with grown sons and nephews.

"Let's go downstream this afternoon, shall we?" I answered. "How's that with you two? Or would you prefer the other way again?"

"It doesn't matter much," George said, rising. "The fishing's good today." So downstream we decided to go.

Around the bend of the river on a sand bank to our left we saw a tent pitched. Smoke was curling lazily upwards from a campfire, and a khaki-clad figure was sharply outlined against the skyline. As we drew nearer he waved us in, and, pulling alongside the bank we discovered an acquaintance from an estate near Ted's who was also fishing in the vicinity.

"Why, hullo, Masters!" George said. "Fancy meeting you here. You haven't met our American friend, Jack Nicholson, have you?"

"American, are you?" said Masters, shaking Jack's hand warmly. "Well, then, you must be even more horrified than I am at all this ghastly news."

"What news?" we all replied in unison. My heart missed a beat. "We've no radio with us," George explained hastily.

Phil Masters looked at us in amazement. "Why, don't you know the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor on the seventh?"

There was a deadly pause. Then very quietly Jack said, "Would you say that again? I must have misunderstood you."

"The Japs bombed Pearl Harbor to blazes on the seventh," Masters answered grimly. "Yes, I said it and I meant it—also our prize battleships the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* have been sunk—and an attack on Singapore won't be long in coming."

We were all completely speechless. I gripped George's arm and Jack turned his back for a moment, obviously fighting for composure. Suddenly he turned, his face gray and set. "You are quite sure?" he asked almost beseechingly.

"Yes, I'm only too sure," Masters answered doggedly. "We're all in it now and God knows what will happen. I got the news here on my radio and it knocked me over completely."

A swift feeling of impending disaster gripped me. My imagination had always been capable of a good deal of overwork, but this was stark reality, and what the outcome might be we all knew very well was impossible to guess.

"Let's get out of here," I said, rising impulsively. "I can't bear it," and bidding Masters a somewhat awkward and hollow goodbye, we got into the boat. All thoughts of further fishing were obviously out of the question. The sun seemed to have gone in as we silently made our way back up the river to the resthouse.

We sat around the big log fire in the evening busy with our own thoughts. We knew very well that anything might happen now to our part of Assam, and a sickening fear gripped my heart deep down that this, indeed, might mean the end of our family life. Almost the only remark George had made was, "Well, this will affect every last one of us now throughout the world before we are through."

Jack was too overcome to reply. His dynamic personality seemed utterly crushed. We had decided at once to return to our bungalows in the morning. The blackout would most certainly be in force and there was no knowing what effect this news would have on the thousands of coolie laborers on the plantations and oil fields.

The men obviously must be back at their jobs without delay, and I wanted to have Rosemary with us and also to get into communication with Elizabeth. I wanted to talk to Ted, too. He was always so sane and balanced and helped me to keep my feet on the ground. I could discuss with him, better than with anybody else, the silent fear which was almost choking me.

We had explained as best we could to the servants what had happened and the necessity of our immediate return to the bungalow, but they were obviously confused and disquieted and could not make out what it was all about.

Early next morning we packed all our gear and stores and started the long trek back to civilization. The first thing we saw as we neared Sadiya was a plane flying low over the water. This in itself was extraordinary. We had never seen a plane in Assam in all the years of our sojourn there, and the Indians were obviously scared though they were fascinated by this giant bird as some of them were explaining to their companions that it must be.

Dusk had fallen as we dropped Jack off in Teensung and proceeded to the outer confines of our plantation. As we slowed down on the narrow road to allow a bullock-cart to pass, a voice suddenly rang out, "Halt! Who goes there?" I nearly jumped out of my skin, but George, with remarkable presence of mind, replied, "Friend," and stopped immediately. I felt I must be dreaming. Who could be shouting "Halt!" and bringing us to a standstill almost at the door of our own little private corner of the world?

An enormous bearded sentry with fixed bayonet approached us; he looked like a Sikh from one of the Northwest Frontier Regiments. With great dignity he questioned George and explained that a state of war now existed and that a company of his regiment was camped near the beginning of our tea. He warned that in future we should be challenged whenever we went out or came in.

He also told us that the first air-raid alert had already been sounded that morning, and that as a complete blackout was in force we must proceed without lights.

"Tell me this is all just a silly nightmare," I begged as we literally felt our way along the remaining short distance to the bungalow.

"Well, we have to face facts now that we never dreamed we should have to face in this part of the world," George replied gravely. "I know you will match up to this emergency."

Making a frantic effort to control myself, I said, "Only promise me this, that you will not send me away . . ." I had a sudden violent premonition of things to come. "That I could not match up to."

"Darling," he replied very gently, "try and understand . . . I will only do anything that I have to do to insure your safety and Rosemary's."

It was long after midnight before we had finally adjusted all the blackout curtains and tried to create some sort of calm and assurance among the staff.

Early next morning I had to gather the malis, or gardeners, together and start them digging trenches for air-raid shelters in our beloved garden, in accordance with orders received during our absence. George meantime was busy getting endless trenches prepared throughout the estate as shelters for the laborers who simply could not understand what it was all about.

Our own servants too were completely bewildered. I tried to ex-

plain to them that we might be invaded at any time by a strange enemy from across the mountains, and I endeavored to make them understand what a bomb was, and how they were dropped from the "flying birds." They were merely horrified that such things could be. Hadn't the white "Lord Sahib," as they called the Viceroy, and their own master as well, the power to stop such things at once? I could feel our prestige falling like a barometer in wet weather and it only added to my sense of confusion and despair.

The trenches, when dug, were viewed with suspicion and distrust by the labor force. At the next raid alert George found, while patrolling the area with his assistants, that a large majority of the coolies had put all their cows and goats in the trenches for safety, with a few children on top. The grownups refused to get into the trenches themselves. If they were going to die, they said, they would rather not be buried first.

I personally preferred to stay in the bungalow with Rosemary. One of the worst features of the whole blackout to me was not being able any longer to carry lights at night. The cobras and karaitis were unaware of any state of war and still lay across the roads and garden paths if they felt so inclined, and an ideal place to meet up with a cobra would be a dark trench on a dark night. I had for too long moved at night only with a lantern, and I figured it was much safer to stay in the house and take a chance from a bomb than to walk into the jaws of a snake.

It was impossible also to keep the trenches free of mosquitoes, and one was quite certain to contract malaria within a very short time sitting in a trench at night. Portions of growing tea were being hastily uprooted for air-strips and the breathtaking project of a road being cut through the almost impenetrable jungle from Ledo into Burma and on to China was being seriously started.

"Can it ever be done?" I asked George in amazement one evening at dinner. "Is it possible for any human beings to do such a thing? The jungle is like a dense wall, and think of the snakes and wild beasts and the malaria."

"Anything can be done, I suppose," he answered, "but it's a gigantic undertaking."

And before very many moons had passed, the Ledo Road was an accomplished fact, and planes were flying continuously across some

of the most treacherous mountain terrain in the world, known then and forever after as the Hump, and Jack's oldest boy was one of those who were doing it.

Thousands of tea-plantation coolies were pressed into service to help build the road and planters were appointed in turns to supervise them and interpret for the American troops, who with their equipment poured into India. Outside our garden gate a small signpost was erected, which read: "Tinsukia—Ledo—Kunming. 1000 miles."

Red Cross centers, PX posts, hospitals, wayside churches, bakeries, everything, in fact, that it is possible to establish in a country at war, was built on that wonderful Ledo Road. One of the finest air-conditioned hospitals in the Orient sprang up at Margherita for American forces in the India-Burma-China area, and alongside the little British cemetery there, which for years had been the last resting-place for tea planters and their families, now lie many boys from almost every state in the Union in a cemetery of their own.

Christmas was almost upon us and the packages that I had ordered before we went to Paya were lying on the verandah waiting to be opened. I had no heart for Christmas but Rosemary had to be considered.

We went through all the motions of a Christmas tree and the usual festivities, but on Christmas night we heard on the radio of the fall of Hong Kong. As long as Singapore held, we told ourselves, Burma would be safe.

George and I suffered from an increasing restraint toward each other as the days wore on. It seemed as if we were strangers, afraid to show what was in our hearts and minds, and yet we both read each other's thoughts with the greatest of ease, and shrank behind a wall of reserve foreign to us both in relation to each other.

Rosemary came dancing into the room one morning with a little bunch of flowers which she placed in my lap. I was writing to an old friend in Singapore begging her for news.

"These are from my garden for you, Mummy." She spoke somewhat hesitatingly, then "Why don't your eyes dance any more?"

"Don't they, darling?" I parried as I prayed for strength to find the right answers for whatever might follow.

"No," she went on, "they don't, and you and Daddy don't laugh together any more."

"Oh, I'm sure we do, don't we?" I lied weakly, for it was the truth.

"Would it make you happy again, Mummy darling," the little voice went on, "if I gave you the money in my bank. . . . You can have it all."

Oh, God, I prayed, take away the lump in my throat until she is out of the room. "No, thank you, my sweet," I answered shakily, "you keep it and when this old war is over we can go shopping in London again all together."

"Everything will be all right, won't it, Mummy?" the little voice seemed urgent now.

"Yes, darling," I replied, "everything will be all right. Why don't you ask ayah to have the Syce put the saddle on your pony and you can go for a ride till lunchtime?"

Off she skipped and I tried to return to my letter but it was no use. From the window I looked out over the hedge straight into a gun-emplacement, its crew standing by ready for an emergency. I suddenly felt mortally tired.

As the days dragged slowly by, the suspense became almost unbearable. We went to the club, and had neighbors in for bridge. We became expert at driving in the dark and answering speedily the sentry's urgent challenge to halt. Nobody seemed to have anything to talk about for we dared not speak of the things that were in our minds. We were all filled with the same overwhelming sense of foreboding.

It was at this time that Mother, saddened and distraught by what was happening in the world and particularly by our own situation, passed quietly away after a severe bout of influenza. Bitter as the blow was at the time, it was merciful that she was spared the sorrows and the heartaches that were to follow so soon after her passing.

For Singapore did fall, Malaya was swiftly overrun, Rangoon was lost, and the ripe plum of Burma, filled from end to end with fifth-column activities, was soon to be plucked by Japanese hands. The enemy's advance could not be stemmed. The worst had happened.

As I sat at my dressing table pretending to fix a broken earring on the night that we received the news of the fall of Rangoon, I heard George coming up the verandah steps. He gave his usual whistle but I pretended not to hear. Let me gain every second I could. Getting no reply from me, he came hurrying along to our room. My heart was beating wildly and a cold perspiration broke out on my forehead. I knew what he was coming to say, what we had been secretly dreading for weeks. Bracing myself to face what I knew was for him, too, an agonizing situation, I switched off the light and walked to the door to meet him. It would be easier if I could not see his face, and I would spare him all I could.

"I know what you have come to tell me," I said unsteadily. "I have to get out as quickly as possible and take Rosemary with me."

"It won't be for long, darling," he said, as he took me in his arms and held me close. His voice was trembling, and I myself dared not speak again. "I will join you wherever you are, just as soon as this is all over."

Chapter 30

IN THE SHORT time that was left to me in the home where my roots had gone down so deeply, I moved about in an agony of despair. George put up his usual front, but underneath it all the misery in his eyes could not escape me. We tried to carry on in as normal a way as possible during those last awful days together but it was a complete failure and we both knew it. Rosemary was deeply distressed and my understatement of the real facts only confused her mind the more.

"But where are we going, Mummy?" she kept asking.

"I don't know yet, darling," I told her.

"Will the Japs come to Assam, Mummy?"

"I hope not, but we can't be sure, and mothers and children are a bit in the way when soldiers are busy with their jobs."

"But we are leaving Daddy all by himself?" Tears started to her eyes and I turned my head away that she might not see my own.

"We must leave Daddy for a little while," I said. "He has to take care of things here but soon he is to retire and then we will all be together again in England for good."

"Can I take my dolls and the crib, Mummy, and my bicycle?"

"No, darling, you can't," I answered. "We can only take just a little luggage and then Daddy can bring the things we specially want when he comes." I looked at my own treasured possessions, the well-filled bookcases, my pictures and ornaments, everything that I loved which made home what it was.

The evening before I was to leave we tried to eat our dinner but each mouthful choked us both, so we left the table and went out into the garden where everything lay shimmering in the light of a perfect full moon. We walked hand in hand up and down the tennis court, back and forth, back and forth, neither of us saying a word.

At last George spoke with obvious effort. "Try and remember

this is only temporary, and as soon as things are over, we will be together again for good."

I tried to answer but I could not. The thought of walking out and leaving him, of his being taken prisoner by the Japs or some other horrible catastrophe, haunted me. I was fast losing all control over my self-possession. This could not be happening to us.

I tried to say something, anything, but I could not restrain my tears. Silently they coursed down my cheeks. I sank down on the low wall that I had built around one part of the flower garden and was conscious of the perfume of stocks and mignonette which filled the air. It seemed as if this garden held all the sweetness of our life together forever in its keeping. George sat down beside me. I felt that he was near the breaking point as well, and we both knew that nothing either of us could say would be of the slightest possible comfort to the other.

I was wearing an old white evening gown which he loved. Tomorrow, I thought desperately, I shall be gone, and this dress will be hanging in the cupboard of my room like the ghost of a dead past. And where was I going? With a few suitcases of necessary clothes and a young child already overwrought, I had to go somewhere, anywhere, to escape the danger of the oncoming Japs. It was a grim and terrible prospect.

"Darling," I said after awhile, "promise me that you will take care of yourself." What a futile remark, I thought despairingly, just words, trite words. They meant nothing. How could he take care of himself properly when I wasn't there?

"Of course. I'll take care of myself," he answered bravely with a terrific effort to speak in a normal voice. "And you take care of yourself, that's the main thing for me."

"Oh, dear God!" I groaned inwardly. Here we are just telling each other to take care of ourselves when we had no more power than the man in the moon over the fate that seemed closing in on our lives.

As I looked around the garden in its moonlight setting, the lawn and walks were peopled with memories of the past. I could see Rosemary taking her first tottering steps on the tennis court, holding George's hand. The gaiety and laughter of tennis and lunch parties rang in my ears, and the vision of Elizabeth, though far

away, moved before me so clearly I almost felt that I could put out my hand and touch her.

Impulsively grasping George's hand, I held on to it desperately. "We've fought a good fight together, darling," I sobbed. "Promise that you will never stop loving me, however long we are apart."

"Don't say that, my beloved," he answered brokenly, "you know that I have always loved you and always shall, through all eternity."

How long we clung together in that moon-drenched garden I do not know. This one last night together of exquisite agony ended in the sleep of utter despair as the dawn broke.

We planned to drive by car to the junction at Tinsukia next afternoon, to take the train for Calcutta. George was to come only as far as Tinsukia and see us off. He could not leave the plantation on any pretext whatever. I took one last frantic look round the bungalow and garden and walked as in a dream to the waiting car. The dogs, all bright eyes and wagging tails, were hurt and mystified that they were being left behind. I dared not even stop to pat them or give them a last caress. Rosemary's white bunnies were racing around the lawn in the sunshine, happy and unconcerned. As we drove away, a choking sense of impending doom gripped me in a stranglehold.

The station was packed with human beings fleeing from the oncoming danger. Already through the narrow jungle pass from Ledo many, both European and Indian, had walked from Burma. They formed the vanguard of the famous retreat of the British and American forces under General Stilwell, which is so brilliantly described in Doctor Seagrave's *Burma Surgeon*. Many of these refugees lay on the ground with an expression of complete hopelessness on their weary faces.

Several of our women friends and neighbors with babies and small children were also among the harassed travelers.

Ted had come to the station to see us off. Deeply moved, he played a part which deceived none of us. With all the art of an expert actor he laughed and joked with Rosemary, teased me about my frock which, he said, was far too smart and pretty for the train, and promised it would not be long before we all met again. I was grateful to him for keeping the tense atmosphere somewhere within the bounds of sanity.

Just before we left he put his hands on my shoulders and looked me straight in the face. I could see that tears were not far from his eyes, but he spoke firmly and gently. "There is no other way, Pal," his grasp tightened on my arm, "this is your biggest role. Don't miss the cue anywhere, will you?" I could not speak. I made no effort to do so. Dumbly I looked at him as in a dream.

George stepped forward and took me in his arms. "Have you got everything, darling—your keys and . . ." His voice trailed away as our lips met. We were oblivious of the crowds, the noise, the confusion.

"Everything but my heart," I murmured brokenly, at last.

"I'm keeping that, and you're taking mine, till we meet again," he said gently. Then the whistle blew and I stumbled into the train and a great darkness seemed to settle over me as we pulled out of the station.

Chapter 31

THE JOURNEY to Calcutta was a nightmare. It took almost twice as long as usual, for at every siding and station we had to pull in and wait, sometimes one hour, sometimes seven, while trainload after trainload of troops and war material which were being poured into Assam took priority over us. As I lay in silent anguish in my bunk, my mind went back to my first journey over this same line long years before. Then it had been a huge jungle beast which had impeded our progress; now it was the beast of war which lay across every nook and cranny of the familiar countryside.

I had begged George over and over again to let me go to Shillong and remain there, but he would not hear of it. He was certain that Assam would be invaded, and he was right. Some of the worst fighting took place around Manipur and Imphal, and at one time the Japs came to within twelve miles of cutting the single track line, our only exit by rail to the south. His one desire was to know that Rosemary and I were as far removed as possible from the horrors of such an invasion. Reluctantly, because of Rosemary, I had to give in, but I was obsessed with the feeling that I was leaving him to some horrible fate.

We arrived at the Great Eastern Hotel completely worn out, and no sooner had we bathed, eaten and fallen into bed than the air-raid sirens started wailing and we were all ordered to assemble in the big marble-pillared lounge of the hotel.

We were a strange and motley crowd in our night attire, as we sat crowded together in the half-darkness, waiting for the bombs to drop while the planes roared overhead.

I had no definite plans as to where I was going. I had been invited to America but the formalities, from what one could hear, seemed to be almost insurmountable. It appeared best to head for Bombay for a start, and make plans from there. Everything in the

line of transportation was completely disorganized. Telegrams also were taking from two to ten days to reach their destinations. After several days I was fortunate enough to get some train reservations to Bombay, but again the trip took twice as long as usual. I was straining every nerve to carry on as best I could for Rosemary's sake, for her world, too, had suddenly turned upside down, and I wanted to give her what sense of security I could.

On reaching Bombay, we found the place congested beyond belief. I went direct to the Royal York Hotel but no accommodations were to be had there. Refugees were streaming into the town by sea from Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. Troops, both officers and men, filled every available place.

Wearily we trudged from one hotel and boarding house to another, always with the same reply, "No room left." By evening I was in despair. I returned to the Royal York Hotel and asked to see the manager. I told him my position and that it was at his hotel long years ago that I had begun my honeymoon. Could he, would he, for old times' sake, find me a place for the night? Eventually he did find a room that we could occupy till morning and by the irony of fate, it lay just across the landing from the one that we had occupied on our wedding night. As I dropped into an uneasy sleep it seemed as if I could smell the perfume of the roses on my dresser, feel the touch of a kiss on my bare shoulders on the moonlit balcony.

The next day I went to a house agent to see if I could find some rooms. After much difficulty in locating the agent, I was told that there was one small apartment I could rent for a month. I signed the lease at once and took over the apartment, which had two servants in attendance, a cook and a sweeper. Abdul had come all the way to Bombay with us and I clung to him as the last remaining link with home and security.

As I walked up the steps of the hotel to collect our suitcases, a firm hand grasped my elbow from behind, and turning I looked into the worn and weary face of David McIntyre. "David," I gasped, "oh, David, how wonderful to see you—what are you doing here?"

"I have just seen Brenda and the twins off to South Africa," he answered with a grim half-smile. "I needn't ask you any questions. I know what has happened."

We sank down on a divan in the lounge and David ordered

coffee. "What are your plans, Monica?" he enquired gravely, as he handed me a cigarette.

"David, I don't know, I've never been so bewildered in my life. I can go to South Africa or Australia. I have been invited to America. I have been advised not to go to England at present if I can go anywhere else. I begged George to let me stay in India."

"No, my dear, he's absolutely right. Nobody can foresee what is in store here, but we can suspect the worst on the frontier. I insisted on Brenda's trying to get to South Africa, she has an aunt there. When I can I will join her."

For a while we sat talking in a strained and desultory manner. David had to leave at noon on the return journey to his plantation, and as we parted I felt that here was another link with the past which was broken.

I made inquiries as to the possibility of going to America, and after several days of vainly battling with the necessary red tape, I was advised to take the first ship I could get and make my way to Capetown. From there I would have a better opportunity of getting a passage to the States. Before a week had elapsed I was called by a shipping company and told that a boat was sailing for Capetown the next morning.

Foregoing my month's rent and hastily packing my suitcases, I took them in a cab to the docks where they were searched and sealed, and Rosemary and I found ourselves on board a grim-looking vessel stripped of all peacetime fittings and under rigid military discipline.

That evening we pulled out from the docks and anchored only a half mile or so from land and for four days we remained in exactly the same spot, waiting for orders and with all communication with land forbidden. As I gazed and gazed at the city which was my last connecting link with everything I loved, I was overwhelmed with the desire to jump overboard and swim to shore.

We were a tragic cargo of broken humanity. Every person on the ship seemed to be laboring under a weight of despair. Most were women from Singapore, Burma and Malaya. Some had had their husbands bombed before their eyes, some did not know where their menfolk were, so swift had been the Jap advance. One woman had been torpedoed and with her two children had been put on a raft

only to see the children machine-gunned at her feet as a Jap plane dived low. She was a silent and tragic figure.

After what seemed an interminable voyage we sighted the lights of Capetown one evening of late May 1942. For three days, however, we lay outside the harbor waiting for a berth. The whole dock area was crowded with troopships going to India and the Far East, and it was not until they were out of the way that other ships could take their places. A light rain was falling as we eventually approached the dock. Table Mountain, that gigantic and wonderful spectacle, was shrouded with a thick white tablecloth.

We were hours standing around in the customhouse to have our baggage searched. At last it was my turn and a bright young man heaved my suitcases onto a table.

"What's in them?" he asked.

"Just clothes, and a few personal ornaments," I said. To me they were treasures of another life—a photograph of George and my family, a little china horse Elizabeth had given me years ago, a pair of Rosemary's first shoes, and one of George's ashtrays.

"Any bees?" he asked languidly, scratching his head.

"Bees?" I said, utterly astonished, a rising tide of anger surging through me. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Yes, bees," he repeated. "You can't import bees into the Union of South Africa . . . or beeswax, for that matter," he said as an afterthought. If he but knew the cargo of tragedy and suffering we had been carrying he would have realized that bees were about the last thing in the world anyone would have thought of carrying in his suitcase. After assuring him tartly that I had no bees and no intention of having any, he passed me through the gate.

We went to the only hotel that I knew of. "No room," was the reply to my inquiry, and, as far as I could gather, it was to be Bombay all over again. After hours of searching in the rain, I found a dingy little place where one room was available. I remembered during the night as I lay wide-eyed and utterly wretched, that the Overseas Club of London, of which I was a life member, had a branch in Capetown.

Early next morning I went to see the secretary who told me that every room they had was occupied by women and children from Singapore and Malaya. She was very kind, however, and said she

would certainly let me know if any vacancy should occur. A week dragged by in which I scoured the town and the countryside, but every place that had accommodations did not want children. I was almost in despair when late one evening the secretary of the club called me and said that if I would help her in the office I could occupy an annex which consisted of two very damp and dingy rooms in a stone courtyard at the back of the club building.

My first few days of office work must have strained the secretary's patience to the limit as I almost wrecked the filing system and lost the key of the safe at a most critical moment. As I lay in bed at night with the mice running lightheartedly over my head I wondered if she was going to let me stay.

When I had had time to collect myself a little I began to think of what I was going to do next. We were urged by the High Commissioner not to return to England, which was already overburdened with refugees. I again visited the American Consul. Never shall I forget the kindness and understanding I received from him and his staff, but I was simply appalled by the formalities that had to be gone through. Another great difficulty was that there was no ship, and the Consul could not tell me when there would be one. For several weeks I had to inquire at his office every day.

One early morning, however, I received word from the Consulate to hold myself in readiness as there was a possibility that a boat from Bombay for New York might call at Capetown within forty-eight hours. Only if the captain was willing could anyone else be taken on, as the ship was already overcrowded with seven hundred American missionaries and their families being repatriated from India and the Far East.

On the afternoon of the same day I was called by phone to the Consulate and told that space was available for us, but that before I could finally receive my papers for embarkation I must present proof that I had never been convicted of any crime. I was in despair. Here I was in a strange country far from home and I had to prove that I had never been behind bars. There was nobody in South Africa who knew me or my past.

As I trudged back to the club in a pouring rain the whole thing seemed impossible to achieve, and it was only in the middle of dinner that evening that I suddenly thought of some old Assam friends

in the Indian Civil Service, whom I had known since I first went out there. Sir John Trinder had risen to the top and was then Governor of a large Province in India.

I ran all the way to the cable office where I begged the clerk to tell me the very quickest way I could send a reply paid cable to India to prove I had never been in jail. He looked at me in amazement, but kindly consulted the endless official books and finally told me that for an exorbitant sum I could send a special emergency cable and hope to get an answer in twelve hours or so, though he could not, of course, guarantee anything during wartime.

With trembling hands I wrote out a long and involved cable praying that Sir John and Lady Trinder would understand. I paced the floor of my room most of the night, and at ten o'clock the next morning a reply came assuring whomever it might concern that my life was without blemish, and that a certified copy of this statement was already on its way by air mail. The Consul was willing to accept the statement of one in such authority, and I was told that the ship in question would be in port next day.

Early next morning, after an affectionate farewell at the club, I gathered Rosemary and my luggage into a cab and set out once more. On boarding the ship the first person we saw was Jack Nicholson and three other American friends from Teensung.

The journey was more nervewracking than the previous voyage had been. This time we were on a Naval transport and a few days out at sea an epidemic of measles swept the children off their feet, Rosemary included. Twice we had narrow escapes from submarines, and as the depth charges shook the ship from stem to stern the thought of being pitched into the icy waters with the sick children added torment to the experience.

The sight of the Statue of Liberty, at last, on a fine August morning, is one that I shall never forget. Standing so calm and erect and secure in the sunshine, completely unconcerned with the frenzied comings and goings of the traffic below her, she represented for all time the concrete expression of everything that men held dear. It was heaven for us all to emerge from the darkness and suspense of the past three weeks at sea. Crowds of passengers lined the rails, delirious with joy at the sight of their homeland.

A dreadful surge of loneliness and homesickness gripped me by

the throat. I withdrew to a quiet corner of the deck while I struggled to bring some sense of reason to bear on the situation. True, I was a stranger in a strange land once again, but the tapestry of my life had been so varied that the working of a further intricate pattern into the canvas should be regarded as but a further challenge. Time would pass, and there would be so much to tell George to keep up his spirits till we should meet again.

I felt a light touch on my arm and turning quickly I faced my bedroom steward who had my topcoat over his arm. "The Immigration officials are waiting to clear your papers, Madam. Will you please come with me?"

Chapter 32

OF THOSE FIRST breathtaking, hectic days in New York City I have few adequate words in which to express my emotions. The speed, the rush, the bustle everywhere after my jungle life led me repeatedly to wonder if I should ever live to see another day! One of the most amazing and pleasant parts of this new experience was the wonderful kindness which we received on all sides. Everyone from the Immigration and Customs officials onwards treated us as if we were honored guests. It was most heartwarming. I was not then in a position to understand that this kindness is one of the outstanding characteristics of the American people.

The family to whom I carried an introduction, not having had any idea when we should be arriving, were just leaving for the country but they reserved a hotel room for us and introduced us to friends, and these friends introduced us to *their* friends, and I was quickly impressed with the efficiency of the American woman and the extraordinary ability of the American male to wash dishes and fix things around the house. Jack Nicholson took two days off from getting on with his business affairs and appointments to shepherd Rosemary and me around town. He introduced us to the wonders of the drugstore, the dime store, the self-service markets. He took us on a breathless tour of Radio City, the top of the Empire State building, a drive round Central Park in a carriage, to the Bronx Zoo and finally on a trip in the express subway in which I almost died of sheer fright at the colossal speed. We also sampled the further wonders of Grand Central Station which to me looked more like a cathedral than a station; Rosemary had her shoes shined perched up in a high chair, much to her delight and mine, and in fact I think Jack got just as much of a kick out of it all as we did. "Well, this is America, Sis," he joked with Rosemary as her eyes literally bulged at the sight of our banana splits which we ate at a

drugstore in the station. "How about it—do you think you're going to like it?"

"Oh, I think it's glorious," she mumbled ecstatically through the whipped cream. "I feel so full!"

I was so full, too, in more senses than one: My thoughts were never far from George and I longed for him to be with me to share this new world. I dared not let myself think too deeply of the thousands of miles he was away, nor of the danger they were all in. It is just for a while, I kept telling myself, and every evening I wrote him long letters about every little detail of our new life; though it might take weeks for my letters to arrive, I had the wonderful sense of talking to him as I wrote. It was as though my memory called up his presence in the room.

I had to make up my mind pretty soon where I was going to come to anchor, and Jack brought up the subject as we sat in the hotel lobby on the Sunday evening after our arrival. "What is your next move?" he asked as he lighted a cigarette. "Have you decided which of your friends you are going to visit next?"

"I really don't know which would be best," I answered. "My chief concern is to get Rosemary settled in school as soon as possible." I took some letters from my purse that had come to me by special delivery air mail. "The Warings near Cleveland want me to go to them, and Jill Waring's married sister wants me to go to them in Chicago. You remember they are daughters of some old patients of Father's, who both met and married Americans in London soon after I went to India."

"Sensible women," Jack teased, then more seriously, "Have you kept up with them all along?"

"Mother did regularly, I only rather spottily, but both wrote and invited Rosemary and me to come to them if we had to leave . . . that was after Pearl Harbor."

"Well, I think you'd find Cleveland a little quieter and more restful, particularly for the child. You could always go and visit in Chicago at any time. I have friends in Cleveland, too." He took a small book from his inner pocket. "I think I have the address here," he scanned the pages rapidly, "yes, I have. I'll put you in touch with them if you decide on that. And my sisters, too," Jack continued. "I know they would be only too glad to have you for a visit—

they live right on the Sound on Long Island—lots of bathing and fishing.”

“It’s marvelous of you to suggest it,” again I was taken aback by this same spontaneous generosity of which there seemed to be no limit, “but I won’t inflict myself on your family like that. Perhaps some day I can have the pleasure of meeting them.”

“Excuse me just a moment,” Jack jumped to his feet, “there’s a man over there I was trying to reach in his office yesterday . . . I won’t be a minute.”

What a typical businessman he looks, I thought to myself as Jack caught his acquaintance just as he reached the front door. His tall lithe figure, faultlessly dressed, matched perfectly his keen, well-ordered mind, his controlled and alert thinking. With his mathematical brain and his obvious precision in everything I could see more clearly in his own country how suited he was to his particular job. I had not had the slightest idea what an industrial engineer was till he had explained in detail in the bungalow one evening the intricacies of time study, job analysis, standards, wage control and all the rest. It seemed to me that one must have a particularly analytical mind and an acute awareness of detail, which was exactly what we had come to see that Jack possessed as the months passed and we had got to know him well. And over and above, he was the most incredibly versatile person. Added to being a fine fisherman and shot, he played the violin beautifully, could tune a piano in short order, was an ardent stamp collector and photographer, and could put up an excellent showing on the golf course. His energy appeared to be inexhaustible. As far as I could see he had a large circle of friends in and around New York, several of whom were already anxious, he had told us, that he should get to work right away and take over the problems of their plants for them, and it was less than a week since we had landed.

“Would you like to have a walk down Broadway and see the lights?” Jack asked as he returned. He was slipping a card into his vest pocket which carried a most imposing array of pens and pencils. He had a fascinating habit of withdrawing one or other of them to do a little quick figuring about something or other at any given moment on the back of a menu or corner of a newspaper.

“I’d love to.” I jumped to my feet. “And I’ll sleep on this problem

of Cleveland or Chicago," I said as we threaded our way out of the crowded lobby, "and decide in the morning."

"Do that, then," he said. "I'm going to have a quick visit with my sisters, and the boys, but I'd like to see you off safely first and know that you are fixed."

And Cleveland was my choice, to which lovely city, then only a name to us, Rosemary and I set forth two days later, armed with candy and flowers and magazines which Jack brought to the station after having arranged our reservations for us and wired to say when we were arriving. Just as we were about to get into the train he handed me a paper on which he had written various addresses and telephone numbers. "You can always get me at one place or other if you need anything," he said kindly, "don't forget that . . . and one thing more, as soon as you get settled be sure to buy some rubber snowboots, it won't be long before the winter comes and you'll need them in this country. Well, goodbye, chin up and God bless you. I'll be seeing you." And before I could find words at all and wrestle with the lump in my throat we were on our way to Cleveland, a terrible feeling of utter aloneness enveloping me like a huge cloud.

A set of kitchen utensils, a rather antiquated gas stove, and a hungry child are nothing out of the ordinary, in themselves. Most women no doubt face similar objects every day of their lives without turning a hair. But when I faced them a few weeks later on first taking over a little apartment of my own, I suddenly realized that I did not know how to cook. For years and years I had had to superintend everything very closely, but when it came to amalgamating the necessary ingredients into the sort of meals to which I had been accustomed I was absolutely and completely at sea. I had been determined not to outstay my welcome with friends; there was no knowing how long the war would last, and when an apartment had become available I decided that it was the right thing to try and stand on my own feet. It was only with the aid of a cook book which Rosemary had very thoughtfully, not to say tactfully, bought me at a drugstore, that slowly but surely I was able to prepare meals that we both agreed might be very much worse!

I was so warmly received and made friends so quickly that it

helped enormously to still the ever-present ache in my heart. I joined the Red Cross sewing party, and was asked out constantly, and the fact that Rosemary and I lost our way one morning soon after our arrival brought to me one of the most treasured friendships of my life. I could not get used to the traffic on the right-hand side of the road, and we were standing at a busy intersection in complete confusion, wondering which way we wanted to go, when I decided to ask a very sweet-looking woman if she could give me directions. Not only did she do that, but she took us along in her car, and from that moment she also took us into her home and her family life, and from then on Marion became my guardian angel, my guide and my tower of strength. We formed one of those sincere and deeply satisfying friendships which happen only at rare intervals in a lifetime and of which women are generally supposed to be incapable. Her husband and her three grown children also became a part of my life and what they meant to me in the days that were to come could never be described in mere words.

Every evening without fail I wrote to George and posted my letter once a week. It took almost six weeks even by air mail to get our letters to and from each other. Everything was censored and it was difficult to write with any sense of freedom. He could tell me nothing of what was going on at his end except in the most meager detail. He was enchanted with everything I had to tell him about America and our daily doings. His only thought, as was mine, was of the day when we should be able to meet again and retire to our little house in the country in England. We kept from each other as far as possible the hunger that was in our hearts, and I was always secretly anxious about him. So many things were possible. Almost every day Marion called me up and ever quick to sense how I was feeling she would suggest something that we could do to stave off my loneliness in a strange land.

I had returned from her house one snowy evening feeling particularly low. They were such a happy and united family. It was the evening before my first Thanksgiving Day in America and also our anniversary, and it seemed ages and ages since I had had a letter from George. I had promised Rosemary that we would have a turkey, and Jack had written from New York that he would try and

come over to help us eat it. After dinner I endeavored to make a game of preparing the turkey. "Whatever are we going to stuff it with?" Rosemary asked as she peered into its capacious interior.

"One of the living-room cushions I should think," I laughed.

Back and forth we joked until the job was done and Rosemary was in bed and asleep. Then as usual I prepared to write my letter to George. I sat quietly, pen poised, remembering every detail of his face, recalling him in kaleidoscopic detail—the square shoulders, the unconscious troubled gesture of his hand over the back of his head. Then suddenly the phone rang. I lifted the receiver, my mind far away.

"This is Western Union calling," a rather detached voice announced. "I have a cablegram here signed Edward Champion for Mrs. George McCrie. Are you that party?"

"Why, yes." My heart missed a beat. A cable from Ted—what ever for?

"The message reads," the impersonal voice enunciated carefully, "Further to my report condition suddenly critical, little hope can be entertained." A copy will be mailed to you if you wish."

I could hardly breathe against the sudden, agonizing fear that gripped me by the throat. "What report? I don't know what you mean." I spoke wildly now. "There must be some other cable for me, have you got another cable?"

"I'm very sorry, Madam," the voice was aloof, unconcerned. "I would not know of any other cable, I just have this message to deliver."

"Oh, please, can't you find out?" I begged. "You don't know what this means to me, there must be some explanation."

"Cables are all subject to delay, Madam, in wartime. You can call the Supervisor at Information, that is all I could suggest."

Blindly I crashed down the receiver, my throat tied in a tight knot. What could it mean, oh, what on earth did Ted mean? Not George, oh, surely not George? And yet it could mean nothing else.

"Condition suddenly critical, little hope can be entertained." Oh, no, no, not George, please God, not George. What could have happened? He was always well and strong, he took care of himself for my sake, he promised. Sinking into a chair I buried my face in my hands. Oh, what was I to do? How could I get any further news?

Ted must have sent other cables first. The Japs! Suddenly a cold thrill of horror ran through me. Could it be the Japs? Could they have got George? I had been able to get no direct news of the situation there since I left except the worst possible kind of reports in the papers. I'd send Ted a cable at once, I must keep calm, it would be all right, everything would be all right—it had to be, it must, it would. Summoning all my strength I called Western Union and dispatched a frantic message to Ted. I looked at my watch, it was ten o'clock. He might not get the cable for days. Oh, if there was only someone who could help me, give me some news, enable me to know what had happened. The agony of suspense was almost unendurable. In vain I tried to calm myself. "Everything will be all right," I told myself over and over again. "Just have faith, keep calm, all will be well." Up and down, up and down I paced the floor while my troubled brain searched this way and that for some explanation of Ted's cable. Everything was upset in wartime, I reasoned, soon the first or another cable would come telling me what had happened. The hours dragged slowly by. Sleep was out of the question. Pacing the floor was my only outlet in the darkness of the pit into which I had so suddenly fallen.

Just before three o'clock in the morning there was a ring at the door. I flew to open it. A Western Union man stood with a telegram in his hand. "I have to tell you that it is not good news, ma'am," he spoke kindly as I signed the form and handed him back his pencil. Closing the door I tore at the envelope with trembling hands. "Perhaps this would be the first cable," I thought wildly, "this may give me the explanation." Turning on another lamp I bent eagerly to read the short message. "Deeply regret to inform you," I was shaking like a leaf as I read, "George passed away peacefully one twenty today, for all our sakes be brave. Edward Champion." And then, as with a sound of mighty rushing waters closing over my head, I fell across the sofa and remembered nothing more.

Chapter 33

THE SUCCESSIVE stages of shock, despair, rebellion and the agony of the night watches that engulfed me in the time that followed are difficult to expose to the cold light of day. I had little sense of what was going on around me. Food tasted neither hot nor cold. I was unaware of the time or of what day in the week it was. If it had not been for the fact that Ted had sent duplicates of all cables to Jack Nicholson and that Jack had flown to me at once I should have been unaware of the fate that had overtaken George for none of the other cables reached me then or later.

Jack, as was his wont, had quickly, though not without flinching, plunged the knife deep into my heart. I would not have had it otherwise. In as few words as possible he told me that George had been called out at night after an alert. Somehow the watchman at the railway crossing had not been on duty, and in the density of the blackout George had not seen the approaching train, also traveling without lights, and he had driven into it. The mental picture was so torturing that I cried out loud in my distress, I was oblivious to the tender and compassionate words of comfort that were pouring into my ears. Like a caged animal I only wanted to escape anywhere . . . anywhere from the horror and the calamity and the chaos that were tearing me to pieces. Jack had remained for almost a week in a nearby hotel, a week in which I wrestled alternately with the temptation to take enough of the sleeping pills the kindly doctor had given me, to end it all and follow George, and with the urge to take the edge off my suffering with doses of alcohol in a quantity to which I was entirely unaccustomed. It was when I was engaged in one of these mighty wrestlings one morning as I half-heartedly forced myself to sweep the floor that a letter was quietly pushed under the hall door. There was no mistaking the bold clear handwriting . . . for a moment my heart almost stopped. "There

had been a mistake, then!" I told myself wildly as I rushed to pick up the letter—"They were all wrong! Of course they were." I was certain now . . . they were all wrong . . . all of them. Frantically I turned the envelope over and over while my eyes searched for the postmark among all the censorship markings. The letter had been mailed over a month before! I do not know how long I sat with it in my lap. I hadn't the courage or the strength to open the envelope.

I was shaking like a leaf and a cold perspiration had broken out over my forehead. Slowly at last I drew the letter from its travel-stained envelope. It was a short note and through a mist in front of my eyes I followed the lines through without reading anything. Gradually the words began to penetrate my fuddled senses, words of love and hope and tender devotion . . . a great wave of physical sickness swept over me . . . and there would be more letters . . . and more . . . and more—yet George was dead! Gone from me for ever and ever, but his loving words expressing over and over the thought of our being together again would come flying to me through the air to beat me to my knees with merciless disregard. George was dead. He was sleeping the long sleep thousands of miles away from me in the quiet little palm-shrouded cemetery beside the river at Margherita just a stone's throw from our house on the hill. Beneath the snow-capped mountains there was only the soft lapping of the sunlit waters by day, the gentle stirring of the breeze through the palms in the moonlight by night to keep him company. Forevermore I must go on without him, the seasons would come and go, the birds would sing, the flowers would grow, the busy world would keep on turning and I should never see him again.

For over a month correspondence had been piling up on my desk but I had not been able to bring myself to do anything about it with the exception of brief letters to Elizabeth plunged into deep sorrow just when she was in the full flush of her first young love. I had replied by cable to Ted's shocked and compassionate letter. Christmas had come and gone and somehow I had lived through it.

At the beginning of the new year I had made an effort to answer the polite and impersonal letters from the lawyer requesting me to sign at the points marked X. "I, Monica, widow of the late George . . ." but the words always became a blur in front of my

eyes. I did not seem able to grasp them at all. I, Monica, was a widow. One of those strange rather out-of-place women who roam the world with no real status and nobody to stand behind them. In a complete daze I forced myself to sign the forms and wrote a covering letter one afternoon before I started out on what had become a habitual walk to the lake before the winter dusk set in. There on the wet sand I paced backwards and forwards beside the swirling grey waters whipped into an angry foam by the bitter winds. Nothing but the mournful cry of the gulls companioned my misery. Struggle as I would, I knew that I was letting myself sink into a morass that could lead only to utter destruction. All the training and the discipline of the years seemed to have deserted me in my hour of greatest need. My determination and strength of will had evaporated into thin air. If only I did not have to receive any more of those agonizing letters. I had already received three more, and I knew there would be at least one more to come. Maybe I would not even open it. What was the use?

And in the depths of my suffering I was always a little ashamed to realize that I was not alone. Someone who had been so wonderfully good to me was now down in the pit beside me, for Jack Nicholson had received word of the loss of his boy, the apple of his eye, in the Philippines.

Fate was no respecter of persons. Sorrow came to all alike, rich and poor, and sooner or later one had either to face up to it in one's life and rise again or sink forever beneath the waves of self-pity and useless grieving. And I had so much to be grateful for. I was surrounded by a band of devoted if new friends who never faltered in their efforts to drag me to my feet again. Miriam, Kate, May, Sally, Jan, Betty, Virginia, Winnie, Ruth and some whose first names I did not even know. The memory of their goodness and unobtrusive sympathy and understanding would always remain in my heart. And I wanted to rise again. With all the strength of my being I wanted to meet and master this, the worst challenge of my life.

As I turned the key in the front door one snowy afternoon on my return from the lake the mailman came slowly up the path behind me and as I reached out my hand to him I knew with absolute certainty that he had brought my last letter from George. Quickly I thrust the familiar envelope into my purse. I would read it later.

Rosemary was to be out for dinner and a movie and I should be, I must be alone. When finally the chores were finished I sat down on the low stool in front of the fire and steeled myself to open the envelope. A great coldness enveloped me and my throat was tied in a tight knot but no tears fell as I forced myself to read. Quickly I scanned the pages full of the dear, familiar phrases, on and on as the knife turned slowly in my heart: "Everything is so blank and empty, darling, but I take courage from your strength. . . . Keep busy, get something to do if you feel like it . . . Share your fun and your sweetness till we meet again. Oh, if only I could see you just for a few moments. . . ." Suddenly the room seemed to be spinning round me. I was falling into a deep, dark, all-enveloping chasm. A dreadful sense of finality engulfed me, the waters were closing slowly over my head, and then, all at once I began to struggle for my life in the darkness and the cold and the mist; I was fighting, pushing, trying to breathe and lift my head above some dreadful suffocation, and I knew if I didn't go on fighting, I was going to sink forever into the blackness. "If I could only just see you." Slowly, painfully, the words took shape, and with shape meaning, and with meaning, reason and purpose, clarity. If he could see me now this minute with my unkempt curls only too thickly dusted with grey, my drawn face devoid of makeup, nails unpolished, my dingy-looking dress, hollow eyes. If he could see me weak, defeated, sick, useless, despairing, without apparent life or hope, what would he say?

I buried my face in my arms, and in the depths of my despair there slowly came to me at last, as perhaps a floating log might lightly touch a drowning hand, a fluttering resolve—shadowy and unformed at first, but with the passing of the minutes a feeble spark of strength was added to the resolve until it became a tangible entity in my mind, something that I could grasp and make into a reality in all this hideous nightmare. At length I knew that this resolve demanded of me, now, at once, a gigantic effort, that would help to plant my feet on the pathway to a new beginning, an effort to face reality, to brace myself to accept the inevitable little by little, as others were having to do.

George was counting on me, he'd said so, he had always counted on me. I must not let him down. I must begin at once, I knew that

quite clearly, while resolve was fresh and clear in my tortured brain. I must act and I must act fast, now that my mind was made up. I would go to my room and change, I would start on my hair and my face and my nails. I could never bear him to see me as I was then. He took such a pride in my looks and my clothes. Slowly and heavily I rose and went to my room. I switched on the light, locked the door, and sat down in front of the dressing table. I hardly dared look at my reflection in the mirror, and when I did, I recoiled with the shock of the face that looked back at me. I seemed to have aged years in a matter of weeks.

"If only I could see you . . ." I could see the look that would be on his face, the shocked pained look, perhaps even the look of utter disillusion at my weakness. "I take courage from your strength . . ." that was what he had said, that was what he had believed, but it was from his faith in me that I had now to draw my strength. Resolutely I opened the dresser drawer and took out my brushes, my sadly neglected makeup and manicure case, my jewel box. Slowly and painfully I worked until my task was completed. Almost it seemed as if he were standing beside me directing my every move lest I should falter in my resolve. Deliberately from the closet I chose the black dress that had been his favorite, from my little jewel box the pearl earrings that had been his gift to mark our twentieth anniversary. For a fraction of a second I faltered as I paused to glance in the mirror as I passed, then squaring my shoulders with an effort I turned out the light and opened the door. All sound from outside was muffled with a heavy blanket of snow. Through the lacy pattern of the empty branches against the landing window a white man's moon was gently shining.

Chapter 34

THREE AND A HALF years can pass in a flash, filled to the brink with all the things that satisfy; they can pass on the leaden feet of monotony; and they can just pass. In the last category the time had gone by for me. While living a normal existence on the surface, there was nevertheless in the inner recesses of my being the constant feeling of a weight around my heart. In retrospect I could at least claim a certain satisfaction in the fact that I had, though not without ups and downs, held to my resolution that I would swim and not sink. I had found a job, I had taken a small house that Rosemary should have as near an approach to home life as possible. I had reared a dear and devoted little spaniel puppy who had many a time leapt onto my bed at night and licked my tears in a frenzy of concern, and a refugee cat which had attached itself to the household and placidly shared in the bringing up of two baby rabbits that I had found under a tree in a vacant lot.

It had not been easy for me to find something to do, untrained and inexperienced as I was. People had rallied in a wonderful way to help me and I was offered a job at the rationing board which would have been interesting and quite abnormally well paid, I thought. But when it was almost settled it was suddenly realized that I was not an American citizen, and so, quite rightly, I was not eligible. The same circumstances prevented one or two other possibilities, and I could not take on the position of house-mother, which was offered me, as I had my own child to take care of. Finally, quite by chance, I met a woman who persuaded me, against all my instincts, to take the representation in my district of a firm of nationally known cosmetic manufacturers. When I found that it would entail going round to all the women in the neighborhood selling as well as demonstrating, my spirit almost died within me. Possessed, as I was, of my full share of British pride and reticence, the very

idea of such an occupation made me ill. I could no more go round ringing people's doorbells, I protested, than I could fly.

But within a month I was doing it, nevertheless. It was a job that I could do in my own time which enabled me to run the house and take care of Rosemary in her out-of-school hours, and after a short training in demonstration and makeup, coupled with a knowledge of the products and their excellence, I found myself with a blue leather bag and not one ounce of courage starting off to ring the doorbells of happy, busy and contented housewives all around the neighborhood. Jack had been a faithful visitor whenever his time permitted. He had been all in favor of my taking the job, had helped me in the beginning in making out reports and keeping accounts. He had also encouraged me to work in the garden and take photographs; his own example of courage in sorrow was always with me. He had recently taken on a consulting job in Cleveland and most weekends he took Rosemary and me in his car to explore the countryside.

Once in a while and as time went on a little more often, Jack would say to me when we were out in the country weekend driving, "Have you any ideas as to what you want to do when the war is over?" The answer always seemed to be the same, "I don't know, Jack, I just don't know, except that I must go to England to Elizabeth for a start." The very thought of returning to my homeland where through the years we had dreamt of settling one day in a house of our own stirred up the old heartache to an unbearable degree. The thought of visiting all the old familiar places without George filled me with a sense of despair that I had the greatest difficulty in fighting down.

When the inevitable question came up again a few days after VE Day in Europe, we were sitting at the edge of a field while my dog was blissfully chasing here and there. "There are a number of things I can do, Jack," I answered as I picked at a handful of grass. "Johnnie has offered me his house in England for as long as I like. He is going to a job in Nassau. Or I can join him in Nassau, he says, and spend as long a time there as I want. I can go back to Shillong and take a little house there. . . . Most of all, I think, I should like to build myself a small bungalow on the river

at Margherita and live there. Perhaps I could find Lilla again and Abdul. . . ." My voice trailed away.

"That is quite out of the question, my dear," he answered somewhat brusquely. "You couldn't do that alone. And what about Rosemary, she has to finish school, you know."

"Yes, of course," I answered quickly. "I know that. It's just an idle dream I have sometimes. I know it isn't practical."

"It isn't even good for you." He lighted a cigarette. "You cannot go back and live in the past again."

"No, I expect you're right," I said. He usually was; his realistic attitude had more than once been my salvation.

"I quite see that you have to make a trip to England to see your family and to get business affairs finally settled, but . . ." momentarily he hesitated . . . "I'm going to miss you terribly. Do you suppose you will ever come back to the States?"

We looked each other full in the face without flinching. This was not the first time that he had worked around to this same sort of remark. There was such a lonesome, unhappy quality about the half smile that flitted across his strong face. He was hungry for the things in life which he seemed to have missed and yet he would rather die, I knew, than admit it. This impasse in our conversation always threw me into a complete dither. I did not know what to do or what to say and invariably I changed the subject as deftly as I could till the next time.

I knew that I should miss him too. He had been the most wonderful friend to me. I doubted if I should have ever won through at all without his consistent support and faith in my ability to succeed, his unflagging efforts to drag me through my worst moments, his quiet acceptance of his own sorrow which had been so remarkable.

With the final end of the fighting in August 1945, the owner of my little house wanted to return to it and I had of necessity to start making immediate arrangements to give up my job and secure a passage to England. Jack had to go to New York on a business trip which was to keep him there for ten days. He had offered to take care of all the arrangements in connection with our departure and the securing of our passages. Both Rosemary and I felt a keen sense

of regret at the thought of leaving all our friends and the pleasant way of life in America. I was stirred up in so many directions now that the time had come to break the routine of the preceding years that I hardly knew where to begin. I decided the best thing was to get busy on a mammoth housecleaning before I handed it over, and I was in the midst of taking down curtains one morning when a special delivery man came up the path. He brought a letter from Jack saying that our passages were secured and everything was in order for the journey. As I continued reading my heart began to race uncomfortably. "Turning to a more pleasant subject," as he put it, he came straight to the point as usual. He could not visualize his life devoid of all I now stood for in it. Would I consider returning permanently to America and to him? For a moment I was nonplussed. I had come to this bridge at last. How was I going to cross it? Quickly I turned the last page. "We are both lonely," I read, "we have both suffered, we have a great deal in common. If you think we could build a life together you would make me very happy for I love you sincerely. Think it over for a day or two. Time is getting short and if you would like to talk it all over with me I will cut my trip short here and take a plane back." A great big lump had been gathering in my throat as I read the letter so typical of Jack in its forthrightness. It hid between its lines the longing which he had deep in his heart for companionship and affection.

Well as I had known that this question would sometime have to be answered, now that it had come I was suddenly thrown into a ferment of indecision and distress. I sat just where I was with one curtain over my shoulder, another on my lap, as my mind went round and round, back and forth from one question to another. Could I possibly make him happy? Could I with a living part of me buried forever under the palm trees in a faraway corner of the world start again in fairness in a new life, in a new country, and what was more, shut up in a city when my whole soul cried out perpetually for the wide open spaces? Could I adjust my somewhat idealistic, imaginative, all too sensitive temperament to his realistic, hard-headed way of looking at life, his dynamic energy, his passion for meticulous detail, his inability to refrain from analyzing and criticizing everything, which he always assured me was the result of his training for his particularly exacting kind of work? I could

see him then, getting out his pencil to work out the cost of something which he thought was exorbitant, and of the probable time it had taken to make with the price of the labor, and how much cheaper it could be turned out. I always laughed at him when he did it "just for a matter of interest," he said.

Could I willingly give up my country, my slower way of life, my family, my old friends in England? So often I was overwhelmed by a tremendous nostalgia for the land of my birth, the sleepy villages, the beautiful countryside, the green lawns and exquisite gardens.

But I knew that I could never go back to the old associations of my life. I had to go on with the things of the future now, and deep in my heart I knew that Jack needed me and I needed him. But could I make a success of his life for him? That was ever the question, with me. It had to be success and not failure, the same as it had always been with me throughout the years. What would George think? Would he, could he understand? That tormenting thought was like pressing on an exposed nerve in a tooth, and for the following two days and nights my thoughts went round and round till I realized at last that I must come to a decision one way or another.

On the third evening as I sat in the dusk in my garden, my eyes closed, my thoughts wearily wandering over the whole situation, the years seemed suddenly to roll back, and unaware of myself and my surroundings, I was lying again on the bed in the darkness after Mary Rawlings' funeral, my head on George's shoulder. He was talking to me. What was it he had said as he had smoothed my forehead over and over with his hand? "Nobody would want that for someone they love." What was it they would not want? Why, yes, he had been talking about grieving and coming out into the sunlight and letting the shadows fall behind. "If anything should happen to me I could not bear to think of your going on alone for always, you of all people." Yes, he had said that more than once in the long, long ago. He would always be with me, a very part of my being, nothing could ever alter that. I had been so richly blessed in the love that had filled my life, he would want me to go on giving. "It could never be the same," I had said on more than one occasion as I could remember so clearly. "No, darling, not quite the same—of course not," he had always answered and I heard his

voice as distinctly as if he were beside me, "but the artist can create more than one masterpiece. He presents his subject from a different angle, that's all."

I must take a new canvas, different shades of color, set the easel at a further distance, facing another subject, a different view, a sharper light. I could take the deep affection which I felt for the man who had been my bulwark and my defense and who for all his hard exterior had a heart as kind and tender as a child's, and place it as the foundation stone on which we could build together. A broken past could yield the material for a successful future with the intangible cement of tact, understanding, mutual suffering, common interests and sincere regard. We could give to each other the best that was in us, ourselves, our heritage, our countries. We could go forward with love and hope together.

How long I sat on in the darkness I do not know. A gentle peace had touched my weary brain. I rose at length from my chair and carried it into the porch. Turning on the light over the telephone I asked for Western Union and dictated a telegram which Jack would receive in New York before he retired for the night. "Wire me time of your plane," he would read, "and flight number. I will meet you at the Airport. Monica."

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



134 144

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY